

Secrets Outside of California

by Colette Amelia

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Summary: #3 in the California Supernaturals trilogy (sequel to Secrets in the Woods of California) After weeks of guessing, Marina finally has the prophecy-only to realize she has no idea what it means. Her inability to choose a guy has made her relationships with Jet and Brad nothing short of icy. On top of that, the tribe still wants her. She thinks things can't get any worse-she's wrong.

1. Down Under

****Here it is! The final story in the California Secrets trilogy! This chapter is for everyone who wishes that H2O never ended :)****

>The sun was hot against my skin. I could feel the rays penetrating my flesh and seeping into my pores-pores that were absolutely loving the extra vitamin D. I wished I hadn't forgotten my sunglasses back at the house. Even with my eyes closed, the sun seemed to be able to fill my vision with a bright yellowish-orange color. But I didn't care how hot the sun was. In fact, I liked it because it beat the cooler temperatures California usually experienced during the month of January.
"Hmm," I sighed, still delighting in the warmth of the sun on my skin, "Maybe I'll just move here with you."

>"I think I'd be okay with that."
I opened my eyes and sat up.

"Just okay?"

>Beside me, Bella pushed up onto her elbows and smiled. "Mm, yeah."
"Wow," I said, pretending to be hurt, "We've only been apart for a month and a half and you've already replaced me as your best friend?"

>"Replaced you? Are you kidding? I've already forgotten you," Bella joked, "Cleo and Rikki are my best friends now."
We stared at each other for a second before we both burst out laughing. Once we managed to get control of ourselves, Bella sighed and pushed a piece of hair behind her ear.

>"Seriously though," she said, "Cleo and Rikki are great. You need to meet them."
"I will," I said, looking away and out at the ocean. To tell the truth, it did kind of bother me that Bella had made two

really good friends in the few short weeks she had lived in Australia. I hadn't met Cleo or Rikki yet, but from the way Bella talked about them they seemed cool. I was just afraid that when I did finally meet them, I would be the odd man out-after all, Cleo and Rikki were mermaids-just like Bella. For once in my life, I was the one who was different, the one who wasn't a part of the group.

>"How about we spend another hour on the beach here and then we can meet Cleo and Rikki over at the cafe for a drink," Bella suggested.
"Okay," I said. I couldn't put off meeting them forever. Well, I knew Bella wasn't going to let me return to California without meeting them, and I had already been in Australia for two days-there was only five days left on my trip.

>As an early birthday present, my mom had given me a round trip ticket to visit Bella in Australia for a week. I was missing four days of school, and I couldn't be happier. School has basically been hell for me for the past month and a half. Jet barely talks to me anymore, and our lack of conversation only makes the whole lunch table awkward. Brad talks to me more than Jet, but not by much-I think he too is waiting for me to figure out who I want as a boyfriend. Even though he talks to me, things still aren't the way they used to be between us. I trust him completely-I know he would never reveal that I'm a shapeshifter, I would even go as far to say that he has accepted what I am-but, at the same time, I sometimes wonder if he trusts me.
With everything in my social life so messed up, it would have been nice to be able to receive some normalcy at home, but, of course, that wasn't going to happen. Things at home were probably worse. With my dad gone, my whole family seemed to fall into a state of depression. We hardly talked to each other at dinner and afterwards we all retreated to our separate rooms. Christmas didn't come this year. No one really felt like celebrating. New Year's was the same way.

>It was absolutely unbearable, and I think the plane ticket to Australia was my mom's way of showing she knew I needed to get away for a little while. And, although I'd only been there for two days, I had basically forgotten all of my problems-well, I was trying really hard to.
"So, I've been really trying to put this off," Bella started, "because I know it is a sore subject for you, but...how are Jet and Brad?"

>I closed my eyes for a minute before opening them again and facing Bella. I knew she would bring it up-it was only a matter of time-but that didn't stop me from hoping she wouldn't. "Okay, I guess," I said, "I don't really know."
"What do you mean?" She asked, "Don't you seem them almost everyday?"

>"Yeah, but we don't really talk. They seem to have this agreement to hold me at arms length until I decide who I love." Or love more, my brain reminded me.

>"Oh," Bella said, looking down at her feet, which she attempted to bury in the sand, "I'm sorry."
"Thanks," I said. It wasn't like they didn't talk to me at all though. We talked, our conversations just tended to center more on information such as what our homework was or what the hunters were up to-which, lately, was a whole lot of nothing-in other words, conversations completely void of emotion. For the first few days, when I got back to school, I tried to joke with Jet and Brad but neither of them seemed to find my jokes funny, and my laughing alone only made things more awkward.

>"Okay, so forget about the boys," Bella said, smiling again, "Tell me how you managed to escape your guard and hop on a plane over here."
I rolled my eyes. "They literally watch me 24-7," I said, "They even had Tanner enroll in school so he could keep an eye on me

while I'm there. I had to hide in the back seat of my mom's car while she took a bunch of detours so we wouldn't be followed on the way to the airport. It was awful, I almost got carsick."

>Bella made a face. "Ew," she said, "that's not fun."
I shook my head. "It wasn't, but it was totally worth this," I gestured to the white sand, crashing waves, and her next to me, "And, I have a feeling that they weren't happy when they found out I disappeared."

>Bella laughed. "Probably not."
I shrugged. "Oh well. I may be the one from this prophecy, but that doesn't mean I can't look out for myself. I mean, I survived for basically seventeen years without them being on guard."

>"Very true. Speaking of the prophecy," Bella started slowly, "Have you figured out what it means?"
It was my turn to make a face. "No." It had been almost three months since Valerie sent me the prophecy and I still had no idea what it meant. At first I sat for hours each day trying to decipher the meaning and when I couldn't, I even considered taking it to Tanner or Henry or Rebekka or even Geoff before I remembered that I hated their guts.

>"Tell me again what it says. Maybe I can help," Bella said as she laid back down and closed her eyes.
I too closed my eyes and recited what was written on the little piece of paper hidden in my bedroom back in California. "_When red tints Roe, the war of light will begin. Those of the rainbow will be the first plagued. Magus will bare them and fill the dark with fear. But one of many forms will ascend and change the course of fate for a brother Descendant. Together, the one will lead embracing light to fight. Only one can join the sun at dawn_."

>"Mm, kind of creepy, huh?" Bella said, "Okay, so let's take it one bit at a time. What about this 'red tints roe' part? What could that mean?"
"I don't know!" I yelled-loud enough that a couple other people on the beach turned their heads in our direction. I had thought about, and looked at, the prophecy so much that now almost any mention of it made me want to tear my hair out.

>"Well, sometimes in poetry the color red is used to represent love, so maybe when love takes over roe...what is Roe anyway?" Bella said, sitting up again.
I shrugged. "You got me."

>"Hmm, we'll figure that out later," she said, "so maybe red means love. Oh, or it could also mean blood...umm, let's just stick with the love idea though."
"I think I'd like that better," I said, raising my eyebrows at her.

>Bella smiled. "Okay, great! So you've got possibilities now. At least that's something. How about a juice? Cleo and Rikki said they could meet us at the cafe in ten minutes."
I sighed but gave in. "Alright, let's go."

>Bella's smile widened. We both stood up, brushing sand from our legs and grabbed our towels. Bella told me she first met Cleo and Rikki about two weeks ago on the night of a full moon. Apparently that was important but I didn't really understand the significance of that little fact. All I knew was that it was a mermaid thing-something I couldn't hope to understand. But apparently, Rikki wasn't too happy when she found out Bella told me everything. Bella also tried to explain what happened the night she met Cleo and Rikki with the...water tentacle, I think she called it? I don't know, but she lost me halfway through. Like I said, couldn't hope to understand.
When Bella and I walked into the cafe-which was conveniently named Rikki's-a girl with long, brown hair waved Bella over to the corner table she was sharing with a slightly curly haired blonde. Cleo and Rikki I was sure.

>"Hey guys," Bella said, addressing the two girls, "This is my

friend, Marina."
"I'm Cleo," the brunette said, smiling at me.

>"Nice to meet you," I said, smiling back at her. Rikki didn't speak-she just stared at me- like she was trying to figure out if I was trustworthy or not.
When Cleo realized Rikki wasn't going to say anything, she spoke up again. "And this is Rikki."

>I glanced at Rikki again but she still didn't say anything. Cleo scooted over to make room for Bella and I. There was an awkward silence that followed-for a bit longer than normal awkward silences-before Cleo broke it.
"Marina," she said, grabbing my attention, "have you ever been to Australia before?"

>I shook my head. "I've actually never been outside the U.S. until now," I told her.
"I've never been another country either," Cleo said, "What do you think of Australia so far?"

>"I-"
"Bella said you were a shapeshifter, what exactly does that mean?" Rikki interrupted, speaking for the first time. She was leaning over the table, her arms crossed in front of her.

>I have to admit she caught me off guard. I half expected her not to talk at all-to simply sit there staring at me and judging me. "Umm, well, it means I can turn into an animal."
"And what animal can you turn into?" Rikki asked.

>"Actually I can turn into two animals," I said, glancing at Bella before looking back across the table at Rikki, "a wolf and a dolphin."
"So you and Bella have been swimming together before?" Cleo asked, stopping Rikki before she could say something else-something I was sure I wasn't going to particularly like.

>I nodded, smiling at Cleo and ignoring Rikki's narrowing eyes. "Yeah, I really miss our swims together."
"We should all go for a swim together later!" Cleo exclaimed, glancing between the faces around the table, "What do you guys think?"

>"Yeah, that'd be great!" Bella said, then she raised her hand, "Hey Will!"
I turned my head to see a tall, extremely good-looking boy with short blonde hair raise a hand and wave back to Bella. I immediately looked back in Bella's direction. "Who is that?" I demanded, not missing the way Bella's cheeks turned red or how she refused to hold my gaze.

>Bella never answered me though, because from behind me a distinctively male voice said, "Hey guys." I turned around to find the hot guy Bella had called Will standing at the end of our table.
"Will, this is my friend from the States, Marina," Bella said.

>Will was wearing a pair of swim trunks and a t-shirt, no shoes. Over his shoulder he held a pair of flippers. He looked over to me and smiled-he had a nice smile. "Hey," he said, "nice to meet you."
"You too," I said.

>"How was training this morning, Will?" Bella asked-a bit too quickly if you ask me-it sounded like she was just trying to stop him from leaving the table. I smiled to myself-Bella definitely had a crush on this guy-I just had to figure out if he shared the feeling.
"Pretty good," he answered, "I set a new record for my 100m breast stroke. But of course, Sophie wasn't impressed. She wants me to do even better than that."

>I had no idea who Sophie was or what Will was talking about, although it sounded like he was a swimmer-or perhaps a diver-that would explain the flippers. Of course, the mermaid would have a crush on the one guy who loved the water as much as she did.
"Don't listen to Sophie," Bella said, smiling at Will, "Setting a new record is amazing."

>"Thanks," he said, "Well, I better go. I'm heading out to Mako Island to have another look at those caves this afternoon, you can

join me if you want."
"Oh I can't," Bella said immediately, "I promised Marina that I would take her to the marine park."
>I glanced at Bella, frowning slightly. No she didn't.
"What do you want to go out there for anyway?" Rikki asked, pretty harshly.

>"I can't get what happened that night out of my head," Will said as wrinkles formed on his forehead, "I just want to have another look around."
None of the three mermaids said anything but I could feel the worry and tension coming off of them-it was practically suffocating me. What were these caves Will was talking about? I felt like I had heard Bella mention Mako Island once before but I couldn't remember what she said about it.
>"See you later," Will said and walked away from our table.
I glanced around at the three girls-they didn't look happy.
>"So much for our swim," Bella said.<p>

****Because you guys always have amazing ideas about what should happen in Marina's stories, I have decided to have a contest where you can create a character that I will write into this book. There will be at least two separate groups of characters that I will use in the story. However, please keep in mind that I probably can't use all the characters, though I promise to do my best. I also reserve the right to slightly alter the submitted characters to better fit the plot.**

>For the first group, I am specifically looking for characters that are shapeshifters. For the second group, I am looking for characters that are other types of supernaturals, but keep in mind that those submissions will not be used until later in the story. I will post the names of the characters I have chosen to include in each group at the end of a chapter.
To submit a character, please fill out the form below and send it to me in a private message. If you are a guest, you can submit the completed form via a review. Also, if you have any questions feel free to ask. Thank you everyone and good luck! Start brainstorming some magical characters! :)**
>Open Character Submission Form
Name:
>Age:
Type of Supernatural:
>Powers and/or Problems Associated with that Supernatural:

>Appearance (hair, eye color, height, any defining features):
Personality:
>Family (if any):
Friends (also if any):
>Anything Else I Need to Know:<p>

2. Kidnapped

****Sorry it took me so long to get another chapter out; it has been a very busy couple of weeks. Anyway, THANK YOU to everyone who reviewed and also thank you to everyone who submitted characters!****

****If you have any ideas (even if you already submitted a character) please feel free to submit more! I'm hoping to have my list of characters for the first group finalized by the next chapter. Also, if you visit my author page, I created a poll for everyone to vote, so please do! Thanks again and I hope everyone likes this chapter :)****

I thought the waters near California were pretty, but compared to the ones off the coast of Australia I couldn't have been more wrong. The ocean around Australia was like Miss Universe while California was

like Miss State Fair. I didn't even know what I was missing. Over the next few days, I went swimming in those amazingly gorgeous waters with Bella, Cleo, and Rikki at least ten times. After the first time that was all I wanted to do. The three mermaids showed me to the cave on Mako Island that Will talked aboutâ€”a place they called the moonpool. Rikki didn't seem too happy about me being there, but Bella and Cleo definitely didn't mindâ€”besides, there seemed to be a lot of things Rikki didn't like. It didn't matter what Rikki thought though—all that mattered was what I thoughtâ€”and I thought the moonpool was absolutely beautiful. The pool was in the center of a volcano, and when you looked up you could see the blue sky above. It was like a scope to the most pristine part of the sky. I was sure the view was absolutely stunning at night.

And, even with Rikki's standoffish attitude towards meâ€”although she definitely hated Will more than she hated meâ€”I found myself never wanting to leave Australia. I wanted to stay there forever, where my family, my friend, my boy, and my destiny problems didn't exist. What would happen if I did stay? Would the prophecy come true? Hell, I don't have a choice. I have to go back to America. I just hoped that here would be a possibility that the prophecy would changeâ€”whatever it meant. I mean, we're all supposed to be able to shape our own future, right? Why can't I can my destiny? And yet, a little voice in the back of my head kept telling me that the prophecy had been written over a thousand years ago and nothing had changed since then (except the language it was written in of course), so why would it change now? The answer was always the same: it wouldn't.

When the time came for me to leave, I had already been dreading the moment since the first day I arrived and saw Bella standing at the gate waiting for me. I just wished I didn't have to leave her behind. Until that moment I never knew what it was like for Bellaâ€”having to constantly say goodbye to peopleâ€”not knowing when or if you'll ever see them again. But I knew I would see Bella again, I just wasn't sure when. It may be in one year, it may be in two, hell, it may be in five or ten years, but no matter what happened I knew I would see her again. That thought was all that was comforting me as I said goodbye to my best friend.

"I wish I didn't have to leave," I whispered in Bella's ear as I hugged her tight to me.

"Me neither," she said and hugged me tighter. I felt a tear soak through the back of my shirt but I didn't care. Bella's tank top was already splattered with my tears. I had to pull away when they announced that my flight was boarding. I could only smile at herâ€”I didn't know what to say. What could I say? Goodbye? That didn't even seem close to being adequate.

"I'll see you soon?" I said, although it came out sounding more like a question than a reassurance.

Bella smiled, her blue eyes still wet with tears. "Very soon."

I looked over toward my gate—the line of people waiting to board the plane had already decreasedâ€”before turning back to Bella. "Talk to Will. You two make a cute couple," I said and winked at her.

Her mouth dropped open in bashful surprise. I smiled mischievously as I walked towards the gate.

"Wait!" I heard Bella call over my shoulder.

I turned to find her running towards me.

"Don't let Jet and Brad give you the cold shoulder," she said seriously, "You were friends with both of them before any of you decided to become more than that. They should at least treat you like you're their friend." She smiled at me again before she pulled me close, embracing me once more. When we stepped apart she added, "And when you do decide who is _the one_, make sure you're following your heart."

I smiled wide at her and then pursed my lips together to keep from crying.

Bella rolled her eyes. "I'm corny, I know," she laughed, then looked me straight in the eye, "But I mean it."

I laughed again.

"Final boarding call for Flight 1067 for direct service to Los Angeles, California." The flight attendant sounded over the intercom system.

"You better go," Bella said.

"Bye."

"Bye."

I turned away and handed my ticket to the attendant. Walking down to the plane I felt my eyes fill with tears again. It was going to be a _long _flight.

When I landed in California hours later, I was pretty sure the puffiness surrounding my eyes had finally disappeared and the whites of my eyes were no longer streaked with red. I departed the plane, completely exhausted from the fifteen hour flight and ready to snuggle under the warm covers of my own bed. I aimlessly wandered down the corridor of the Los Angeles Airport, texting my mom to tell her that I had landed. A few seconds later, my phone dinged with a new message from my mom: "Be there in fifteen minutes". Reading the text I gathered that either Skye or Coleâ€"or bothâ€"were in the car with her. My mom had trouble texting "okay". My dad was the more technologically advanced parentâ€"he always thought he was so cool when he texted us to come downstairs for dinner.

That was when I remembered my dad wouldn't be at the table for dinner that nightâ€"or tomorrow night, or the night after that. The worst part about my dad being taken to the tribe was that we didn't know whenâ€"or if he would come back to us. We didn't even know where the tribe was to go and visit him. All I knew was that the tribe was located somewhere in the mountains, but there were hundreds, probably thousands, of mountains on the west coast. And who knew? The tribe may even be on the east coastâ€"or Canada. In other words, searching for the tribe would be a hopeless mission. All I could do was keep hoping that they would release him and he would return to us. It had been almost three months since I last saw my dad, and I've missed him every day.

I felt like I was sleepwalking through the airport as I found my way to the baggage claim. As I watched the carousel go round, occasionally spitting out people's luggage, I thought about what Bella told me before I left. She was right of course. I should confront Jet and Brad about at least treating me like a friendâ€"not some random person they know because we have a class together. I was just afraid that they would toss me aside completely if I did that. And I couldn't lose them. That was one of the reasons why I hadn't picked one yetâ€"besides of course the fact that I didn't know which guy I loved moreâ€"I knew that once I picked a guy, I would lose the other one, and I couldn't deal with that. I loved both of them and I wanted both of them in my life. But, as the popular saying goes, you can't always get what you want.

Spotting my red suitcase rounding the corner and heading my way, I ran forward, pushing through the other people from my flight. "'Scuse me, 'scuse me," I said as politely as I couldâ€"but let's face itâ€"I was exhausted and therefore extremely cranky. Reaching for my bag, I heaved it off the raised carousel and onto the linoleum floor. Finally. I could go home.

I checked the timeâ€"I still had about ten minutes before my mom arrivedâ€"the airport had gotten my luggage off the plane faster than I anticipated. I noticed a row of chairs next to one of the nearby doors. I could wait there until my mom called me. I pulled up the handle of my suitcase and began walking towards the exit. I was about halfway there when I felt someone walking behind meâ€"oddly close behind me. Stopping, I took a side step and addressed the man who was practically on my heels.

"You can go ahead of me," I said, the annoyance in my voice clear.

Except the man didn't walk by me, instead, he stopped so that he was standing right next to me. "I'd prefer to walk with you," the man said.

I frownedâ€"something wasn't right about this man. He looked normal enough, maybe mid to late twenties. He was wearing a plain white t-shirt and jeans with a Los Angeles Kings hat on his head. But, for some reasonâ€"it was probably his creepy commentâ€"he was making my heart beat fast, and not in a good way.

He reached his hand on and grabbed my arm just above my elbow. Yeahâ€"heart definitely not beating a good way.

Eyes wide, I shook my arm out of the man's grip. "You have no idea who you're messing with," I told him, trying to keep my voice from shaking. I couldn't handle this now. I needed to get homeâ€"that was all I wantedâ€"for things to be normal again. Why couldn't this creeper just leave me alone? For the first time since the chief assigned them to watch me, I wish I had my guard there. I had a strange feeling that I might be needing their protection. But, then again, if worse came to worse, I was a wolf.

There was a glint in the man's eyes as he looked me over. "Actually," he said mysteriously, "I think I do." Slowly, and deliberately, he lifted his shoulders, placing his hands on his hips and revealing a smallâ€"but certainly effectiveâ€"handgun hidden at the waist of his

jeans.

Well, I thought, _clearly airport security is not as strict as everyone thinks it is_.

The man put his arms back down at his sides. "Now that we're both clear of the situation, here's what's going to happen," the man said as he leaned closer to me again and I felt him place his arm over my shoulders, "We're going to walk out of here together and you are going to act like nothing is wrong. You are going to smile and nod to anything I say and if you scream I'll start shooting. Do you understand?"

I plastered a smile on my face and nodded, because, what choice did I have? There was no way I was going to get shot again. All I could hope for was that this guy would take me someplace private where I could turn into my wolf and attack him. No sane person would believe one guy if he said a girl turned into a wolf.

The man smiled. "That's a good girl."

We walked towards the doors togetherâ€”me still pulling my suitcase. When we got outside I wondered if my mom was here yetâ€”I prayed that she wasâ€”more people against this man would help. Or, maybe it wouldn't. He did have a gun after all, and I certainly didn't want anyone else getting shot and killed.

The man guided me to the right, where, at the end of the lane, was a navy silver minivan with tinted windows. _Crap_. The van was your typical "child abduction" vehicle, but it was close enough that I knew to be scared of what would happen to me if I got inside. Even though I knew he had a gun I couldn't help itâ€”I stopped dead in my tracks at the sight of the van.

The man didn't like that. He immediately moved his arm off of my shoulder and pressed his hand against my back insteadâ€”trying to push me forward. "Don't mess this up now, Marina," he said, "We're so close, and don't forget the consequences if you don't move."

I slowly shuffled forward towards the van and out of the corner of my eye I saw the man smile. When we reached the side door of the van, the man slid open the door and pushed me inside, closing the door again before I could even process that I was no longer out in the open...or that I was not alone in the van. _Crap_â€”again. I hadn't expected for this guy to have backup. But before I could make a move for the door or window or grab something to strike the other men in the van with, the one beside in the seat grabbed my arms and held them down at my sides, tight. One of the men in the backseat reached forward and placed his hand over my mouth while the other man pulled something out of his pocket.

I tried to scream. I tried to break free. I failed. Within the next two seconds the syringe was stuck in my bare armâ€”its contents emptying into my body. Soon, my vision began to blur. I felt dizzy and I swayed in my seat. Something was definitely wrong with me. What had they given me? What was in thatâ€”?

But I didn't even get to finish my thought because in the next second, my vision disappeared completely and I passed out.

3. The Tribe

****Thank you for the reviews, and an extra thank you to anyone to submitted a character! Also, please, please, please visit my author page to vote in my poll. It is at the very top of the page and anyone can vote. I want to know what you guys think! :)****

I wanted it to be a dream, just one long, impossibly horrible, nightmare, so that when I woke up I would be in my own bed or even still on the plane headed for Los Angeles. More than anything I did not want to wake up and find myself in that silver minivan. But I did.

When my eyelids fluttered open, still feeling heavy from my medically induced sleep I saw that it was dark outâ€”whether or not a night had come and gone already I didn't knowâ€”I had no idea how much time had passed or where the hell I was. And, given the darkness surrounding me I had a good feeling that looking out the window wasn't going to help me figure it out. The only thing I did know was that whoever had taken me knew who I wasâ€”or, at least they knew my name. But, the question was, who were they?

Very slowly, I sat up in my seat, taking in my surroundingsâ€”including the pair of handcuffs attached to my wrists. I immediately noticed that the man who had taken me from the airport lobby was in the driver's seat, navigating the van through what looked like a very dense forest, but it was hard to tell because he was driving without any headlights. I glanced around the vanâ€”counting the number of people in itâ€”six, including myself. Five men. Five big, strong men to capture one seventeen year old girl? It didn't make sense. Unlessâ€”unless these men knew that I was a shapeshifter.

I felt my heartbeat start to pick up out of fear. If these men knew I was a shapeshifter then I was in more trouble than I thought. What if they were hunters? I knew Brad would have never told his family and friends about me, but what if they somehow discovered my secret on their own? Brad's mom, Helen, had been the one to shoot me a couple months back in the woodsâ€”what if she heard about me missing a bunch of days of school that same week and put two and two together? Either way, if these guys were hunters and knew what I was, then did Brad know they had taken me? Was he trying to come up with a plan to let me escape at this very moment? But, would he go against his family and life-long friends just for me?

I deflated inside. He probably wouldn't, especially since he wasn't happy with me for not being able to choose between him and Jet. Even after all he did for me last fallâ€”knocking his own mother unconscious, taking me to the hospital, lying to his entire family (including other hunters he'd known his whole life), and of course not telling anyone my secretâ€”I couldn't imagine that he would betray his loved ones for me. I wished he would, but I wasn't so sure I would if I were in his shoes.

"Ah," came a voice from the front seat, "You're awake."

I jerked my head up to see who was talking to me. The voice sounded familiarâ€”I had definitely heard it beforeâ€”but it wasn't the voice of the man who had taken me from the airport. This voice was coming

from the man in the passenger seat and it made chills skate up my spine. My eyes strained to make out the face of this man in the dark. Whoâ€"?"

"Stephen," I whispered through the blackness. Even though I could barely make out his features, I could see his face break out into a smile at the sound of his name.

"I have to say Marina," Stephen started, "running away to Australia like you did was not your best move. I thought you'd be smarter than that."

I had planned on simply glaring at him before I realized that probably wasn't effective given the lack of lighting. "It got me away from the overprotective eye of the tribe for a little while," I shot backâ€"my fear had almost completely disappeared at this point, replaced by annoyance.

"Yes, but see the chief didn't like that," Stephen said, "He ordered Geoff and Rebekka to watch you, and they couldn't very well do that with you disappearing to another country, could they?"

"That was kind of the point," I said.

"Exactly. There was a reason you were being watched," Stephen explained, "The chief thinks you need to be protected andâ€" "

"You don't?" I asked, cutting him off.

He ignored my question. "_And_ the fact that you were able to evade the shifters assigned to protect youâ€" "

"You don't believe I'm this 'one of many forms', do you?" I asked, leaning forward.

"_You_ evading your protection detail proved to the chief that he wasâ€" " _Stephen tried again in clipped tones.

"No, that's not it," I said, smiling. I was glad I was getting under his skin, "You don't even believe in the prophecy."

"_Proved that he was wrong to leave you in California_!" he finally finished, at that point so frustrated that he was on the verge of shouting. The other men in the van began to stirâ€"he had definitely woken them up.

"Wait," I said, realizing the meaning of what Stephen just told me, "where are you taking me? Are you taking me to the chief?"

It was Stephen's turn to smile. "Under the orders of the chief, you are to live in the tribe until the events described in the prophecy have taken place."

"But that could be years!"

"The chief is aware of this," Stephen said simply.

"My dad made a deal with Sebastian," I argued, "I could stay at home in California if he returned to the tribe instead."

"That deal was made under the context that you would remain in California under the protection of Geoff and his family. You broke the deal as soon as you boarded that plane to Australia." Stephen turned around to face forward again.

"I'm still a minor, you know. You can't just take me away from my home without permission from a parent," I pointed out, "That's called kidnapping."

"Not if we're saving your life by doing so," he said.

"But that wasn't your decision to make."

Stephen shrugged. "I didn't make the decision."

I stared at him. "You really don't believe I'm the one, do you?"

Stephen whirled back around to look me in the eye. "I think you're a spoiled little brat who thinks that everyone and everything in the world should revolve around her and does anything to make that happen regardless of who gets cut down in the process."

I was silent for a minute. When I spoke again, my voice was barely a whisper. "Does this have anything to do with Brett and Bryn?" I asked.

Stephen faced the front dashboard again but didn't say anything.

"I'm really sorry about what happened to them," I said softly, "I never wanted that."

Stephen still didn't talk. The entire van was silent for the rest of the ride.

As far as I could tell, the road ahead of us didn't change for at least an hour. After that we began to climb uphill. I looked outside but saw nothing but trees. I still had no idea where we were or even what time it was. All I knew was that it was deep enough into the night that the color of the sky hadn't changed since I woke up. I wanted to ask when we would get there, or, again, where we were going, but I got the sense that conversation was currently outlawed.

As I gazed out the window, I wondered what the tribe would be like. The statement about it being in the mountains that Henry said when we first met was obviously true—"well, my conclusion about that was solely based on the fact that our altitude was increasing, but I had a pretty good feeling I was right. The question was, what mountains? I was sure that even if it were light out, I wouldn't have been able to discern what forest the trees around me belonged to or what mountain range we were driving through.

After about another hour—"although I couldn't be sure since they had taken my phone and there didn't seem to be a clock on the dashboard"—the van began to slow down. I stared ahead, wondering why we were slowing. The area didn't look any different, and I couldn't see anything ahead of us—"anything except pure blackness. I wondered how the driver could even see the road. I could make out maybe a few

feet of dirt before it looked like we had met the end of the Earth and if we went any further we would fall off into oblivion.

Then, all of a sudden, a shape began to form in front of the van. It got closer and closer—or, rather, _we_ got closer and closer to it—and the closer we got the bigger I realized this shape was. Whatever it was, it seemed to cover the entire width of the road, and maybe even beyond that. Was it a barricade? But why would it be there of all places, blocking the road? Had we made it? Was this the tribe?

The van rolled forward until we came to a complete stop in front of the barricade, and that was when I realized it wasn't just a barricade to block the road—it was a fence—the biggest friggin' fence I had ever seen. It was made out of the trunks of the same trees that surrounded us, towering at least thirty feet in the air. If the chief expected people to feel welcomed by coming here and seeing this huge fence, then he was out of his mind. Because a fence that big screamed one thing and one thing only—prison.

And I was about to enter that prison.

Very slowly, almost as trying to increase dramatic effect, an opening appeared in the fence to let the van through. We drove into the small opening and I couldn't help but look back over my shoulder at the freedom I would be leaving behind for who knew how long. Turning back around, I stared at what lied ahead—which, looked to be nothing more than trees. Maybe we weren't at the tribe yet? Although I had never been to the tribe and didn't know very much about it, I had always imagined it as your typical small town, complete with a single food market, schoolhouse, and maybe post office. But, like I said, inside the fence didn't look any different from outside the fence.

The man who had taken me—who would probably be forever known to me as the man who took me from the airport and thus took me away from my semi-normal life—guided the van to the left and slowed to a stop. At first I thought I was hallucinating—having been looking into nothing but darkness for the past couple hours—but after another couple seconds I realized that the light coming towards us was definitely a light, a torch in fact. Have they never heard of a flashlight?

Crap. When they said they lived in a tribe they didn't actually mean in the wild, did they? I could only live in the forest for a long period of time if I remained in my wolf form, and, while running around with four legs was amazing, I also liked being human from time to time.

The man holding the torch approached us. He was wearing a long cloak that fell past his ankles, dragging on the ground. He looked like he had just come from the set of a Harry Potter movie or something. Was this how people in the tribe normally dressed?

Stephen and the man who took me from the airport both got out of the van and greeted the man holding the only source of light. Stephen then turned back to open the sliding door for me (and the three men in the backseat with me) to get out as well.

"Don't even think about running," he warned, blocking the opening in

the van, "even if you could get over this wall there is no where to run. You'd die of starvation or freeze to death before you made it to any civilization. Got it?"

I nodded in understandingâ€“_well, there goes Plan A_. Stephen stepped aside to let me out. Hopping out of the van, I was immediately met with the coldest blast of air I had probably ever felt in my life. Something crunched beneath my feet when I stepped out, and I looked downâ€“snow. The entire floor of the forest was covered with what looked like a fresh coat of snow. I had only seen snow once in my lifetime. The closest we ever came to it at home was a layer of frost on an early winter morning, but that melted away as soon as the sun was fully risen. The fact that there was this much snow on the ground meant that we had travelled northâ€“how far, I had no clue.

I shivered against the bitter coldâ€“my sneakers, capris, and t-shirt weren't exactly going to cut it in this weather. Without a word, the man who took me from the airport set a heavy winter jacket over my already frozen shoulders.

"Thank you," I said.

"This way," said the man with the torch, speaking for the first time. He turned and began walking back in the direction he came, indicating that we should follow. While I was frowning at this man with the strange get-up, none of my kidnappers seemed to find him or his actions odd and began to follow. Stephen gestured that I should do the same, so I did. I mean what else was I going to do? Sit out in the snow and pitch blackness and freeze my butt off? I didn't think so.

I wasn't sure how long we walked but it was long enough for me to lose all feeling in my feet so that I was literally stumbling through the snow like a drunken idiot. It was a great way to show these people who they'd chosen to be their "savior". I hoped that the chief would see me this way and send me home, convinced there was no way I could help him or any other shapeshifter.

After a little while, block-like shapes began to form next to the path ahead of us. The little light we had illuminated what looked like a few log cabins. _Thank God, _I wasn't going to have sleep in a cave. Whether or not I would have to sleep on the floor was still up in the air. We walked towards the buildings and I noticed the path we were following was beginning to widen. I passed one of the cabins and came to a stop with everyone else. Gazing around I quickly realized that the man in the cloak's torch was no longer the only light in the area. A single soft light emanated from each of the log cabinsâ€“cabins that seemed to stretch out in all directions. We were standing in a town square, which was clearly the center of a thriving community.

"Well," Stephen said, "welcome to the tribe Marina."

****And now, just as I promised I will announce the characters that will appear in the story anytime over the next four chaptersâ€“|****

****Thank you to **_Doveflight_ **for the submission of the character **Fawn**, and thank you to **_CelticH2O_** for the submission of the**

character ****Drew****. Both of these characters will appear in the story very soon!******

****If your character was not chosen, don't fret. It means that he or she will appear in the story later on. So far, there hasn't been a character that I haven't been able to fit into the storyline. ****

****I AM still accepting character submissions, so if you have an idea please send it to me! Although, from here on out I will ask for only characters that are supernaturals other than shapeshifters or mermaids (or mermen). Thank you again to everyone who has already submitted and congratulations to ****_Doveflight _****and ****_CelticH2O_****, I hope I can do your characters justice! :)****

4. One with Two

****Thank you to everyone who reviewed! You guys are the best! Once again, PLEASE vote in the poll I created. And, as always, enjoy!****

Not only did I get to stay in one of the log cabinsâ€”with two guards stationed outside the front door and one that circled the cabin all nightâ€”but I also got to sleep in a real bed. And, despite my imprisonment, laying in the bed was the best feeling in the world, because, let me tell you, being unconscious in the backseat of a van for an unknown number of hours and then hiking through snow in the dark leaves you with more aches than I bothered to count.

The next morning breakfast was brought to my cabin, where I was told that the chief would meet with me in an hour. In the meantime, I was allowed to explore the townâ€”as long as I was accompanied by one of my guards. If I was really going to be in the tribe for years, I wondered how long it would be before I was allowed to walk around on my own. The sooner I could be alone, the sooner I could start planning my escape.

Once I had finished my breakfast of a banana and cheerios, the man who had taken me from the airport entered my cabin.

"Good morning, Marina," he greeted me, all pleasantries now, "I apologize for what we had to put you through yesterday."

I didn't say anything. I just stared at the guy, trying to convey to him without words how much I hated him for what he did.

"I never got the chance to introduce myself," he continued, clearing his throat awkwardly. I was getting under his skinâ€”good. "My name is Taz. I am here to give you your tour."

I still didn't respond to him. I knew I was being petty, but he was the person who basically ruined my lifeâ€”not that it wasn't ruined alreadyâ€”he just ruined it more. I silently walked into the other room to get dressed.

I discovered my suitcases sitting next to the counter of the small kitchenette in the common area of the cabin early this morning. Someone had been considerate enough to think that I might like to wear my own clothesâ€”I'm guessing that person was Taz, because it certainly wasn't Stephenâ€”along with three pairs of jeans, two long

sleeve t-shirts and a sweatshirt that said "University of Arizona" on it. Also, very thoughtful of Taz considering I only had one pair of jeans and a sweater in my suitcaseâ€"I hadn't needed winter clothing in Australiaâ€"it was summer there, and I certainly hadn't planned on coming here afterwards. Not only did he think to bring me warmer clothes but they even looked to be my size. I wondered where he had gotten themâ€"probably stole them from some girl my age.

I pulled on the "University of Arizona" sweatshirt and my own jeans, quickly brushing my hair. While I wasn't excited to be in the tribe, I was actually kind of excited to see it. Part of me had always wondered what life in the tribe would be likeâ€"now I was going to get the chance to find out for myself. I walked back out in the living area where Taz was waiting for me.

He stared at me, observing my choice of clothing. I noticed a small smile slip on his face for a second before it disappeared. "I brought you some snow boots to wear too," he said, holding up a pair of furry, black boots.

"Thanks," I said, deciding I couldn't give him the silent treatment foreverâ€"if I was stuck here I wasn't going to make myself miserable by refusing to talk to anyone. I grabbed the boots out of his hands, "Where did you get all these clothes?"

He paused, seemingly debating whether or not to answer my question truthfully. "They were my sister's."

"How old is your sister?" I asked as I shoved my right foot into the corresponding boot. My toes hit the front of the bootâ€"they were a bit small, but I figured they would beâ€"I have pretty big feet.

"She was sixteen when she died," he said.

I stopped mid-boot. "Oh," I said, making a face, "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "That was almost three years ago," he said, then changed the topic, "You ready to go?"

I nodded, finishing the laces on my second boot, but still thinking about Taz's sister. I wondered what happened to her. Had she gotten sick? Or maybe hunters got her? Did they even have hunter problems so deep in the mountains? It was hard to believe that anyone could find the tribe way up here.

Pulling on the jacket Taz lent me last night (and hadn't asked for back) over the sweatshirt, I followed him out into the frigid mountain air. It wasn't as cold as it had been last night but it was still colder than I was used to. Unlike when I first arrived, the town square area was alive and bustling this morning. People were walking here and there, carrying various things in their arms, kids were jumping rope, and some teens were off to the side simply observing the scene like I was. I noticed some people wearing the same cloaks the man with the torch had last night, only, in the full light of the day, I could see that they weren't exactly cloaksâ€"they were more like glorified bathrobes.

"This way," Taz said, gesturing to the left. I walked beside him along the dirt path to the center square. Looking around, it seemed

like the path branched off from there in all directions.

"How big is this place?" I asked.

"I don't know the exact measurements," Taz said, "but the town is shaped like a fractal."

"A what?"

"A fractal," he said as if I should know what it meant, "You know, it's a mathematicalâ€" He cut off when he saw my disgusted faceâ€"I was beginning to think Taz was a bit of a geek. He sighed.

"Basically, you have the square in the middle, then there are squares off of each of the corners, and squares off of those corners, and so on. So you can live off of either the North, South, East or West corner."

"Which corner is my cabin a part of?" I asked.

"The Western one," Taz answered, and then pointed across the quad, "The chief's home is in the Eastern corner, as well as the council building, which is basically where they handle all the administrative stuff."

I made a mental note to avoid that area of the tribe as much as possible. I wanted to avoid the chief as much as possible because I was afraid if I was around him too long I just might punch him in the face.

"Very few families live in the Eastern square," Taz was explaining when I returned my focus to him, "It's considered the 'wealthier' area of town, although you can't really have wealth here, just power." He said it with a certain amount of disgust in his tone of voice. "Most people live in either the Northern or Western corners."

"Where do you live?" I asked him.

He ignored my question and moved on with my tour. He led me away from the entrance to the Western corner towards what my navigational skills told me was the Northern corner. As we walked around the outer edge of the main square, Taz pointed out buildings to me. "That's the market, and that's the shoemaker, and the general clothing store, and the movie theater. They show a new movie every week," he said, glancing at me as if that bit of information might excite me. I didn't respond. "Over there is the training facilityâ€"I think you'll be going there laterâ€"and then the elementary school, middle school, high school. The flower shop, furniture store, craft store, and post office."

"You guys have a post office?" I asked, unable to hide my interest. If I was able to a letter out to my family telling them where I was then maybe I could get out of here sooner.

Taz stopped and turned to me, frowning. "Don't even think about it," he said, reading my mind, "They would never allow you to send a letter out."

I hung my head a bit, butâ€"now that I was thinking clearlyâ€"I realized I hadn't really expected the tribe to allow me to use their

postal service. We continued walking around the square. When we passed by the entrance to the Southern, I asked, "What's down there, Taz?"

"Mostly just fields and training facilities for new shifters and the Guard," he said, dismissing the topic.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a girl off to the side watching me. She had long, flowing, red hair and was wearing a long-sleeve white dress. Her legs were bare and I wondered how she wasn't freezing to death. My eyes were drawn to her one knee where a large, jagged scar interrupted her otherwise flawless skin.

Actually, she wasn't the only one staring at me. There were a group of teenagers—mostly boys—surrounding her, who were also staring me down. I could see why they circled her—she was very pretty—but, from the way she was looking at me, I got the feeling that she wasn't the nicest person in the world. When our eyes met I saw nothing but hate and I quickly looked away. I had a feeling she wasn't going to be my friend while I was here.

"Who's that?" I asked Taz, trying to subtly point at the red-head.

Taz looked over and scowled. "That's Fawn," he said, "She's nice if you're in her friend group but if not, forget it—she's a huge bitch."

I glanced over at Fawn again. "I don't think she likes me," I said to Taz.

"I wouldn't take it personally. There are a lot of people she doesn't like."

"Hi Taz!" Fawn called, raising her hand to him and purposely placing a flirty smile on her face.

I raised my eyebrow. "She clearly likes you," I said, smiling a bit.

Taz glared at me. "She's not my type and besides, she only likes me for the power I hold."

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

He glanced at me—he seemed hesitant to answer my question. "The chief is my father."

"What?" I asked, completely taken aback.

"I knew you would react like that," he said, "I know you're not exactly fond of him."

"That's an understatement," I muttered under my breath, but Taz heard me.

"Well, I'm not exactly fond of him either," he said, "I'm supposed to take over the role of chief when I turn twenty-five."

I pictured Taz as the leader of the tribe and smiled. I didn't know

him that well but I thought he'd make a good chiefâ€”a hell of a lot better than Sebastian. "How old are you now?" I asked.

"Twenty-three," he answered and I smiledâ€”not that it wasn't clear before, but there was no way he would go for a girl like Fawnâ€”she looked to be about sixteen, closer to my own age. "The chief was supposed to start training me to take over his position when I turned twenty but he never did. I don't think he is going to relinquish control to me when I turn twenty-five either."

"You should talk to him," I said, "You'd make a great leader."

"Thanks," he said.

A tall woman with fading blonde hair pulled into a tight bun, walked up to us, two men trailing behind her. "Is this her, Theodore?"

It took me a minute to realize that this woman was talking to Taz.

"Mom, don'tâ€”" Taz started.

"Theodore," the woman said impatiently, "Is this her?"

I couldn't decide to be more shocked that Taz's real name was Theodore or that this uptight, slightly evil-looking woman was his mother and the chief's wife.

"Yes," Taz relented.

His mother turned to address me. "Marina, my name is Yvette," she said with a tone of superiority as she thrust her hand out in front of me to shake.

I took it hesitantly, but Yvette looked pleasedâ€”well, as pleased as someone with a permanent bitch face could look. I watched as Yvette's eyes travelled down the length of my body and then back up to my face.

"You don't look like much," she commented, her eyes narrowing, "What are the animals that you can turn into again?"

I glanced at Taz before answering. "A wolf and a dolphin," I said.

"Show me."

"Excuse me?" I asked, my eyes widening. I wondered if I had heard her right.

"Momâ€”" Taz tried but Yvette cut him off again.

"This has nothing to do with you, Theodore," she said, not even looking in his direction, "You heard me. Shift. Now."

"But it's freezing out here. Can't we go inside where it's warmer?" I asked, losing my conviction.

"No. I want you to shift, right here, right now."

I didn't move. This woman may be Taz's mom but she was clearly insane.

She tapped her foot. "I'm waiting," she sang.

I smiled at her. "And you're going to keep waiting, cause I'm not shifting in this cold."

Her foot stopped moving and she narrowed her eyes at me. "They warned me you were stubborn." Then, leaning in close, she whispered, "Do not test me, girl. You are on my turf now, and trust me when I say I can make your life a living hell."

"I don't care what you do, you're crazy if you think I'm shifting out here," I responded.

"I'm sure you don't, but, you know, it would be a real shame if something were to _accidentally _happen to your father." She stepped back and smiledâ€"an evil witch smile I might add.

"Where is he?" I asked desperately.

Yvette put an expression of mock pity on her face. "Oh," she sighed, "If you shift, _maybe_ I'll tell you."

"Marina," Taz said, "you don't have to do this."

I began to undress, removing the boots and Taz's jacketâ€"it was really damn cold.

Yvette's smile widened. "You have five seconds or I'm not telling you," she said simply.

"What?" I asked, completely frazzled, "I have to undress first otherwiseâ€"

"Five, fourâ€"

"You're insane!"

"Three, twoâ€"

Ignoring the fact that I still had basically all my clothes on, I shifted into my wolf form. The sound of fabric shredding filled my earsâ€"my gut wrenchedâ€"I hadn't shifted with my clothing on since the siren had taken control of me last year. And yet, somehow, this felt a hell of a lot worse than that had.

When I looked up, Yvette lips were pursed together. She shrugged. "Hmm, not bad," she said, "And the dolphin?"

What? She didn't actually expect me to turn into a marine animal in the middle of a dirt path, did she? By the look on her face, I could tell she did. This woman was pure evil. How she could be Taz's mother I had no clue.

"Mom, no," Taz said strongly, taking hold of his mother's wrist, "You saw her wolf, you can see her dolphin later."

She shook off her son's grasp. "No, Theodore, I can't. I need proof that she is the one in the prophecy." She stared at me. "Five"

I didn't even let her get to four. I shifted into my dolphin form. It was the worst shift I had ever experienced. I laid there, in the dirt, my slick skin desperately trying to absorb the bit of water in the few patches of snow. This time, I counted to five in my head before I shifted back into human form, hugging myself tightly.

I heard snickering coming from behind me. I strained my neck to see who it was—Fawn and her friends. I immediately turned back to Yvette, my cheeks burning in embarrassment.

"That was cruel," Taz said to his mother.

She showed no emotion. "It was necessary," she said, then threw one of the robes that I had noticed a few others wearing at the ground in front of me, "Here."

With that, Yvette stepped to the side and began to walk away, leaving me there, shivering in the dirt.

"Wait!" I called to her, quickly pulling the robe around my body, "Where is my father?"

She laughed at me. "You didn't really think I would tell you, did you?" Then she turned and strode down towards the opposite end of the square.

5. Greetings

****Thank you thank you thank you to everyone who reviewed! Hope everyone enjoys this chapter!****

I wanted to cry. But I couldn't. I couldn't give Yvette or Fawn, or anyone else, that satisfaction. Holding the robe tight around my body and ignoring the pile of shredded fabric that used to be my clothes, I turned and headed back in the direction of my cabin. The little excitement I'd had for seeing the tribe had vanished.

"Marina!" Taz called after me but I didn't respond.

I didn't turn around, I just kept walking. With every step I took, I felt more and more water build up in my eyes. I walked faster—I had to get inside the cabin before the water burst from the seams. I was on the verge of running when I reached the path to the west corner. I could make it. Everything would be okay—except everything would not be okay because I was still a prisoner in the tribe. The only way things would be okay again was if I escaped and somehow made it home.

I closed my eyes. Who knew when that would happen? It was only my first day at the tribe and I was already miserable. If today was any indication of what the rest of my time here would be like I didn't know how I was going to survive.

I was jolted out of my thoughts—quite literally—when my body collided with someone else's, causing both myself and the other

person stumble.

'Watch it!" exclaimed a harsh female voice.

'Sorry, Iâ€" I cut off when I looked up to see who I'd run into. I was looking at Fawn, and yet, that wasn't possible because I knew I'd left Fawn laughing hysterically back in the square. The girl standing in front of me was an exact replica of Fawn except for two things. The first was the length of her hair. Instead of long, flowing, red hair like Fawn, this girl's hair was cut shortâ€"really short. It was so short that it could have been a boy's haircutâ€"a pixie cut I think the proper term is. The second was that on the left side of this girl's nose was a diamond stud. I assumed the crystal was a fake, but I couldn't be sure. Despite these small differences there was no doubt about itâ€"this girl was Fawn's sisterâ€"most likely her twin. I did my best to swallow my tears and force a smile on my faceâ€"I couldn't have everyone hate me.

"Hiâ€" I started but again didn't finish my sentence.

"You're wearing my robe," the girl said pointing to the front pocket of the robe where a word was inscribed in gold thread.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said, "'I can give it back to you if you follow me to my cabin so I can change into some real clothes."

The girl shook her head. "No, it's not like I'll ever get to use it," she said with a mix of sadness and bitterness in her voice.

Still trying to be friendly, I smiled at her. "I'm Marina by the way."

The vulnerability I'd seen on her face a moment ago disappeared. She stared at me for a minute before she pointed at the robe again and said, "Well, you can read, can't you?" With that she flattened the hem of her shirt and pushed past me.

So much for making friends. Looking down, I pulled on the fabric of the robe to flatten out the cursive lettering. _Fallon? Well, whatever her name was, she clearly wasn't any nicer than her twin.

I wondered what she meant by not being able to use the robe. Could she not wear it because I had worn it or something like that? If so then that was a pretty stupid reason. I would just give it back to her. If someone pointed me to a washing machine I would even wash it for her before I gave it back. Climbing the steps to the small porch outside my cabin, I resolved to do just that. Maybe then Fallon wouldn't think I was so bad.

I wasn't sure why but it really bothered me how Fawn and Fallon almost immediately decided they didn't like me. I wasn't used to being hated. In fact, I couldn't remember a time when someone had disliked so much when they'd only just met me. I shouldn't have cared...but I did. I wanted to have someone on my side, someone who wasn't already straddled between his duties to the tribe as its future leader and his duty to me as a decent human being. And frankly, if I was going to stay here awhile, it would be nice to have a friend my own age.

When I opened the door to the cabin I expected to be able to run

straight for the bed and collapse in it, thus commencing my self-pitying session. My first clue that that wasn't going to happen should have been the lack of guards outside, but I didn't notice the first clue. The second one was easier to spot. And that was the fact that there were four grown men standing in the living space of my cabin. I had forgotten that I was supposed to meet with the chief today.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, glaring at the chief.

"Marina!" he exclaimed turning to face me as his (and my) guards did the same. He was smiling at me and I didn't know why. "There you are."

I raised my eyebrows and crossed my arms defensively. "Here I am," I responded, sounding bored.

The chief walked towards me and then did the something I wouldn't have expected in a million years—he embraced me. It was like I was his long-lost relative or something. I couldn't help but stiffen at his touch. If he noticed this he didn't show it.

"Marina," he said again, "I'm so glad you're here."

"You didn't exactly give me a choice in that matter," I shot back.

The chief just smiled wider, but I could see the edge of his mouth twitching. "Yes, well, I'm afraid it was a necessary precaution."

I laughed. "Did your wife tell you that?"

The smile fell from the chief's face. "That's enough," he said firmly, "Come. You are to meet with the elders of the tribe."

I glued my feet to the floor. "I'm not going anywhere until someone tells me where my father is."

"I'm afraid that's not possible at the moment."

"Why not?" I demanded, "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," the chief said, "but until we can be sure that you will not act out against us, we have decided to keep his location secret from you."

I just glared at him more.

"So, if you would like to see your father," the chief started, "you will be compliant and do as we ask. Now, let's go."

I obliged, following the chief back out the door—so much for putting something other than Fallon's robe on. We—meaning me, the chief, and four guards—headed back for the center square. When we approached Fawn and her friends again, I was glad that my built up tears had evaporated. Brown eyes met another, colder, pair of brown eyes. Fawn narrowed her eyes, smirking at me, as I passed. What did she have against me? I just didn't get it.

I snapped my head forward—forcing us to break eye contact—and

tried to focus on what awaited me at our destination. I tried, but it wasn't very easy. With every step I took I felt a new pair of eyes fall on me. How many people had witnessed my transformations? How many people now knew what I was? How many people knew about the prophecy? I glanced around at the tribe members, watching them stare at me, whisper to each other and their children point. I looked down at my feetâ€"bare and close to frozenâ€"wishing I could hear the thoughts of those around me. Not only was I an outsider, but I was also an anomaly. If there was one thing these people knew, it was that.

When I looked up again, my eyes found another pair of brown. Fallon's were of course the same shade as her twin's but they somehow seemed softer, more welcoming. Despite Fallon's crossed arms and the scowl situated across her face, I knew she wasn't as mean as she liked everyone to think she was. Again I wondered what she meant by not being able to use her robe. I tried to make out who got to wear robes and who didn't, but there didn't seem to be any distinguishing features amongst those who wore them. All the guards wore robes, but so did some parents escorting their children to school and even some children and teensâ€"the youngest of them looking to be about seven. I just couldn't figure it out. I made a mental note to ask Taz about it later.

When the chief and I (and our entourage) reached the building in the East corner that Taz had pointed out to me earlier as the one where the council resided, one of the guards held the door open for us. The chief gestured for me to follow him inside. The lighting inside was soft and it took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the change. When they did I realized I was standing in a large hallâ€"a hall that was empty except for the people that stood in it. I counted eight peopleâ€"men and womenâ€"each wearing a robe. They stood in a semi-circle in the middle of the room but left a single spot open in the center of the curved line. I easily picked out Yvette in the semi-circle, standing to the left of the open space. The chief stepped forward and filled the hole while the guards we'd come with positioned themselves behind me, closing the circle and blocking my exit. If they hoped to trap me they were doing a good job.

"_This _is the girl? The double shapeshifter?" a man standing to my right asked. The skepticism in his voice was very clear.

I glared at the man. Why was everyone reacting that way? What had they expected?

"Yes," Yvette answered, her tone stiff, "I was not impressed either, but I have seen her shift into both forms. Despite her weak appearance and stubborn attitude, she is the 'one of many forms'."

I turned my glare on Yvette. _Weak appearance?_ For a seventeen year old girl, I'd always thought myself to be pretty tough. If she wanted me to prove just how strong I was I would happily put my fist through her face.

The man who had questioned my identity, studied me for a moment. "She clearly requires physical training in addition to the shifting training."

Shifting training? I knew how to shiftâ€"it was practically second nature to me by now. And what was this talk of physical training? Was

running at least three miles every day not enough? My frown deepened. I already did not like these "elders".

"And you said that she's Mark Keller's daughter?" a woman to my left asked.

"I agree and yes, she is Mark Keller's second child," Yvette answered.

"Where is my dad?" I demanded, interrupting their conversation about me, "I want to see him."

Intrigued murmurs escaped the lips of the elders surrounding the chief and his wife.

"We told you," Yvette answered, taking control, "That is not possible at the moment." The other elders hushed at the sound of her voice.

"Marina," the chief said, "there is a reason we have asked you here."

"You mean it wasn't just to decide how to control my life?" I asked sarcastically. The murmurs started up again. _Good, _I thought, _let them know I wasn't going to make this easy for them_.

I noticed Yvette's jaw clench, but the chief held his composure. "No," he answered calmly, "What I am about to tell you is something that you must promise to keep secret. You cannot tell—or show anyone."

"Sure." I shrugged. _Like I was really going to keep that promise_.

"You may be able to shift into two animals, but the prophecy describes 'one of _many_ forms'," he emphasized.

I felt my hopes lift. Were they about to tell me that I wasn't the one in the prophecy?

"We have no doubt that you are the one in the prophecy."

Damn it.

"And, therefore, we believe that you have many forms."

I frowned. "What are you saying?"

"We believe that the wolf and the dolphin are not your only forms," the chief said.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you can shift into _any_ animal."

**Again, please vote in the poll on my author page if you haven't already—I really want to know your opinion! Also, I am still accepting character submissions if anyone has any more ideas. Lastly, just a quick note to *_CelticH2O_*: sorry I haven't included your character in the story yet. I had to reorganize some ideas and wasn't

able to write Drew into this chapter, but I promise that you will definitely see her in the next one! :)**

6. Back to Basics

Thank you so much to everyone who reviewed! Also thank you to anyone who has voted in my pollâ€"you guys are clearly biased hahaâ€"and if you haven't voted yet, please do! Anyway, this chapter is extra long because a lot of stuff happensâ€"hope you think it's good stuff ;)

I was silent as I walked back to my cabinâ€"well, as I was _escorted_ back to my cabin. The elders insisted that the guards who had accompanied me to the council building take me back home. They really didn't trust me. Not that I blamed themâ€"they definitely shouldn't trust me. As I walked, people stared again. I wondered how long it would take for them to get used to my presence. I wondered how long it would take me to get used to their presence.

I was having a hard time wrapping my head around what the chief told me. Turn into _any_ _animal? That wasn't possible. It had never been possible. Even thousands of years ago when some shapeshifters could turn into more than one animal, it was only one other animal, not countless more. Two. That was it. And that was me. I could turn into a wolf and a dolphin. Nothing more. Okay, so maybe the prophecy said "many forms", and yes, technically the word many implies more than two, but turning into a dolphin when I was ten had been some strange fluke. I hadn't turned into anything other than my dolphin and wolf since, and my second change was seven years ago. I would've thought that if I was capable of turning into any animal then at least one of those other animals would have appeared over the past few years, but no. The elders had to be wrong. It was that simple. They were wrong to have me brought to the tribe and they were wrong about me being able to turn into any animal.

I tried again to get them to tell me where they were keeping my father but they remained silent. Not that I really expected them to tell me, but it never hurt to try. Once I was allowed to explore on my own I would find my father. They couldn't treat me like a prisoner forever.

"Let go of me!" I heard a female voice shout. Instinctively, I turned in the direction of the sound. Over near the area that I was pretty sure held the entrance to the tribeâ€"or was at least where I had come in the night beforeâ€"was a girl who looked to be about my age. She had dark brown hair and similarly dark eyes. Despite the distance between us, I could tell that she had tons of scratches and scars all over her body. They looked bad from where I stoodâ€"I couldn't imagine what they looked like up close. Oh, and one other thingâ€"she was completely naked. It didn't take long for me to figure out she was a shapeshifter. Why else would someone choose to be nude in this freezing cold weather? The stranger thing was, was that she didn't seem to care about the cold. In fact, she didn't seem to notice it at allâ€"she was more concerned about the two guards attempting to restrain her.

"Get off!" she shouted again trying to throw the guards' arms away from her, "You can't do this to me!"

"Actually," came a voice that I immediately recognized, "we can."

I turned to see Yvette marching towards the girl, with two more guards at her side. I didn't know what was going on, but if Yvette was involved, no matter what it was, I was on the girl's side.

Yvette's evil smile crept onto her thin face as she approached the girl. "Ah, Drew Carter. I was wondering when we'd be seeing you."

"You should consider it an honor," Drew spat.

Yvette stared at the sneering girl. "Oh, trust me, I do," she said, sticking her nose up even further in the air than it already was, "to prove it I'll give you the most secure accommodations we have."

"I'm not a member of this tribe," Drew said, "You can't keep me here."

"But, you see, we can. You trespassed on our land," Yvette said, still smiling.

"No, I didn't! Your goons pulled me onto this land."

"Well, either way, you're here now. Take her away," Yvette said, waving her arm. I looked around at the rest of the people who had been watching the scene. They must realize that what Yvette was doing was wrong-they must want to say something. Someone must want to protest, but no. When I looked at all the people in the square they were already back to doing their everyday tasks, eyes averted. This wasn't right-how could they all ignore what Yvette was doing to this girl? I knew I couldn't.

"Yvette! Stop!" I called across the square, running over to where two guards were still holding Drew before my own guards could reach out and stop me.

Yvette's eyes narrowed when she spotted me in the crowd. "Marina," she said, "I'd have thought you would have learned your place by now."

I glanced at Drew, who looked at me suspiciously, before returning my gaze to Yvette. "You can't keep her here. This isn't right. She's not your prisoner!"

"Excuse me," Drew interrupted, glaring at me, "But I don't need some scrawny tribal rebel fighting my battles."

"I was just trying to help you," I said, frowning, "I'm sorry but it sounded like you don't want to be here."

"I don't, but that doesn't mean I need your help." The way she said the word "help" made it sound like it was a dirty word. "I am perfectly capable of fighting my own battles, so back off."

I just stared at her. I was stunned. I would have thought she'd graciously accept my help. Instead, I felt like I'd just been slapped in the face.

"Enough," Yvette said, sounding bored, "Take her away."

I watched as the guards led Drew across the square towards the Eastern corner. Fawn, Fallon, and now Drew all hated me. What was I doing wrong? I just didn't get it.

"Marina," Yvette said, addressing me again, "I warned you once before, do not test me. Return her to her cabin."

I turned to see my guards had reappeared. Yvette shot me one last smirk before marching off.

The next few days were filled with early rises, ten mile runs, hundreds of crunches and push-ups, and peeking frustration. The morning after the chief told me what it meant to have "many forms", I was assigned a trainer to teach me how to shift into those forms and to apparently build up my lacking strength. It was absolute hell.

I had to get up each morning at five to be ready for my first ten mile run (in my human form) of the day at six—the second was at four o'clock in the afternoon. Then at eight I had to do fifty laps in the tribe's indoor (thank god) pool and other exercises in my dolphin form. Once I was finished there I had to shift into my wolf form and climb the extremely difficult rock formation in the training facility and work on keeping up my speed during sprints. I had to do a hundred crunches and push-ups before I was allowed to break for lunch.

The worst part was I actually preferred my morning routine to the afternoon one. My afternoons were spent learning new shifting techniques, relearning everything my dad had taught me when I first shifted, and desperately trying to force my body into a different form. I'd always thought I was a shapeshifting prodigy, but it seemed that no matter what I did I couldn't shift into another animal. All my attempts ended in me shifting into my wolf or dolphin form, or absolutely nothing happening. After five days with no results, I think even my trainer was beginning to doubt my ability to turn into any animal.

On my sixth afternoon, Taz paid me a visit. The only good thing about all my training was that I got to do it in privacy. All the other kids and teens enrolled in a training program had to work in groups. I suppose the chief thought my regiment was too unique for me to be placed in a group setting—either that or he was afraid I would away with slacking off if I was in a group. No matter the reason, I was very happy that I didn't have to train in front of Fawn or Fallon. I wouldn't have been able to stand the humiliation of not shifting into another animal for an hour if they'd been watching, let alone five days.

But Taz was a different story. He was the only person in the tribe who actually realized I was a person, not some goddess or punching bag. I was surprised to see him—he had been avoiding me the last couple days because I had been desperately trying to get him to tell me where they were keeping my dad. Of course he refused to tell me, but I could also tell that he felt bad about keeping the information from me—if there was one person who would tell me where my dad was, it would be Taz. However, after I asked him five times, I realized I saw less and less of him. I guess he thought the only solution to keep from lying or disappointing me was to stay away from me. Even

though I wanted nothing more than to see my dad again, I had missed seeing Taz's friendly face the past two daysâ€”maybe I could leave the subject of my dad to the side for todayâ€”just for today though.

He didn't say anything when he came inâ€”he just stood off to the side and watched me train. Despite his presence, I didn't feel pressured to succeed. Instead, I simply wanted to show him that I was strong enough to do thisâ€”which is a completely different kind of motivation. Even with that extra desire to get it right, I couldn't get myself to shift into anything other than my wolf and dolphin.

"Come on, Marina!" My trainerâ€”whose name was too long and complicated for me to rememberâ€”yelled, "Concentrate!"

I wanted to yell back that I was concentrating. I was concentrating so hard that I was afraid I might spontaneously combust. The animal I was attempting today was a dog. Its close relation to the wolf was supposed to make my transformation easier, but so far, nothing about it was easy. I was having a hard time focusing on what kind of dogâ€”which probably wasn't improving my chances. Still, I had to try. An image of a German Shepherd formed in my head and I attempted to make my body match that image. I felt my body began to change, my legs shortening and my long hair receding. Fallon's robe fell away from my bodyâ€”now in an animal shapeâ€”what animal I didn't know, but I desperately hoped it was a dog. I looked up at my trainer for confirmation.

He shook his head. "Wolf," he said simply.

I frowned and shifted back into human form, pulling Fallon's robe back around me.

"Let's take a five minute break," my trainer said, also frowning.

I nodded and walked over to where Taz was standing. "I think we have to face the facts," I said, "I'm a double shapeshifter. Two animals. That's it."

Taz studied me. "You just need to keep trying," he said.

"I am trying," I retorted, "What do you think I've been doing for the past five days?"

He raised his eyebrows at me. "You're not very patient are you?"

I smiled. "It's not exactly my strong-suit."

"Marina," my trainer called, "Come on, let's have another go."

I turned to go but Taz caught my arm. "Did your family ever own a dog?" he asked.

"A dog? Really? With two cats in the house?"

He laughed. "True," he said, "Did you ever know anyone who had a dog?"

"One of my friends in elementary school had oneâ€”" I told him, my

voice trailing off. Where was he going with this?

"Okay, good," Taz said, "the next time you try to shift into a dog, think about that dog. Try to remember not only what it looked like but how it acted too."

I thought about it. Everything my trainer had me thinking about wasn't real—he told me to imagine a dog in my mind, but never one I had actually seen or met before. Taz's idea might actually help.

"I'll try it," I said.

Taz smiled at me as I ran back over to my trainer.

"Ready to try again?" my trainer asked.

I nodded.

"Okay, now remember, you need to picture a dog in your mind. Make your body take the dog's form," my trainer said for what was probably the twentieth time that day.

I did as he instructed, only this time, I pictured my old friend, Hailey's chocolate lab. I remembered him jumping on me every time I walked through the door. Focusing on Hailey's old dog, I shifted.

Once again I had four paws on the ground, but I didn't feel any different from when I was in my wolf form. I looked up at my trainer. Had I finally done it?

He didn't automatically answer me—that had to mean something. He stared at me. The longer he stared the deeper his eyebrows furrowed. I glanced over at Taz, who had picked himself up off the wall and took a couple steps towards me—as if he needed to get a closer look. Neither of them had ever taken this much interest in my transformations, and yet, it wasn't exactly how I expected them to react if I succeeded. Both my trainer and Taz seemed intrigued. I wanted to ask them what had happened—what I did—how I looked. But I couldn't do that without shifting back into human form and losing my current form.

Taz walked over to my trainer and stood beside him, both of them continuing to stare at me. "It's something," Taz said, raising his eyebrows.

"I suppose," my trainer said reluctantly, "but she's still a wolf."

Damn. So I hadn't turned into a dog. So what had I done then? Why were they still interested?

"You're still a wolf, Marina," Taz said, "but it's not your normal wolf."

Not my normal wolf? What did that mean?

As if reading my mind, Taz continued, "Your coat isn't the usual mix of gray and white. It looks like more of a blend of brown and

tan."

Brown and tan? I had never changed the color of my coat beforeâ€"I didn't even think I could, even after the chief told me I could turn into any animal.

My trainer reached for the camera that sat on a nearby table and snapped a photo of me for the tribe's records. Up until then, nothing else I had done warranted a photo. "You can shift back now," he told me.

I did as he instructed. "I really turned into a brown wolf?" I asked Taz excitedly.

"Yeah," he said, laughing at me slightly.

"Ohmigod, that's awesome. I didn't think I could actually do this, butâ€"I don't knowâ€"maybe I can. I wonder if I can change the color of my coat again. Or, wait! What if I can change the color of my skin in my dolphin form? That would be so cool," I gushed. I couldn't help but babble. I was just so excited. The reality was starting to sink inâ€"_any animal_â€"it was really possible.

"Just out of curiosity," Taz started, "What dog were you picturing when you shifted?"

"A chocolate lab, why?"

Taz smiled. "That's why your coat turned brown. You may not have been able to turn into a chocolate lab but you mimicked its coat color. That's definitely a start."

I couldn't help but smile back at him.

"Okay, Marina," my trainer said, "Let's go a few more rounds and then we'll call it a day."

"Let's do this," I said, my confidence completely restored.

But by the end of the day I still hadn't managed to shift into a dog. All I managed to do was change my gray fur to brown once more. When I was released at six after my second ten mile run, my frustration had returned. I seriously thought I had finally had it that time, but no. So I could change the color of my coat? What good was that? As far as Taz was concerned though, it was great progress. I, on the other hand, wasn't so sure.

Consistent with my recent daily routine, I wanted nothing more than to collapse on my bedâ€"maybe with a box of Wheat Thinsâ€"and relax. I greeted the guards as I walked up the steps to my cabin. Almost a week after I had been brought to the tribe, I was still escorted to the Southern corner, where my training took place each day, but thankfully, my trainer now trusted me enough to let me walk back on my own. Without two guards constantly flaking my sides, less people stared at me, and _that_ was a very nice thing. I sighed as I closed the cabin door behind meâ€"my bed was calling.

I nearly shrieked, but managed to slap a hand over my mouth before anything came out, when I walked into my bedroom. Fallon was leaning against the wall beside my dresser, examining one of my necklaces.

Her nose ring sparkling in light of the setting sun that streaked in through the window.

"Good, you're home," she said, not even looking up at me.

"Wha-what are you doing here?" I asked, completely stunned. The only thing Fallon had done since I ran into her my first day in the tribe was glare at me. I watched as she placed my necklace back on the dresser. "If this is about the robe, I swear I was going to give it back. My trainer, he just said that I should keep it until I get one of my own."

Fallon looked at me like I had two heads. "No, this isn't about the robe. I told you, I won't use it," she said.

I still didn't know what she meant by that. Over the last few days I had discovered that the robes were used to make shifting back and forth between one's human and animal form easier, but if Fallon didn't use a robe did that mean she tried not to shift? Or did it mean she preferred to shift without a robe? I decided that those were questions to be answered on another day. "Then why are you here?"

"I heard you were looking for your father," Fallon said, looking up at me, "I know where he is."

7. Underneath

**So, I realize it has been over a month since I updated and for that I sincerely apologize. Life just got crazy. To make it up to you, I am giving you an extra long chapter and, as soon as I post this one, I am going to start on the next one. Anyway, hope you enjoy Marina and Fallon as ninjas of the night haha :))*

"You do?" I asked, inadvertently stepping towards her, "Where?"

"I can't tell you, you'd never find it on your own. Besides, you'd probably get caught," she said, "But I can take you to him."

"Really?"

"No, I'm messing with you." Fallon rolled her eyes. "Why do you think I snuck into your room?"

"But why would you help me? You hate me."

Fallon sighed impatiently. "I don't hate you."

I was definitely surprised by that comment. All evidence definitely pointed to her hating me. "But still, you don't even know me. It can't be easy for you to do this."

Fallon shrugged. "I won't be doing it for you. I'd be doing it for me." A sneaky smile that vaguely reminded me of Brad crept onto her face. "I live for trouble."

I admit it, I was skeptical. I still couldn't believe that Fallon would want to take me to my dad, though she did make a good point about sneaking into my bedroom. What was the worst that could happen?

Even if she was playing me, then I would get probably just get caught someplace I wasn't allowed to be and be given more guards to watch over me. Of course I didn't want more guards, but to pass up a chance of getting to see my dad? No way.

"So are you in?" Fallon asked as she walked over to the window and peeked out, "Cause, you know, I'm technically not allowed to be here either."

I raised my eyebrows. Hmm, she wasn't kidding about living for trouble. "Yeah, I'm in."

She pulled open the window and with one leg hanging out, swiveled her head to look at me. "Great, we'll go tomorrow night then. Meet me atâ€¦" she paused, staring at me for a moment, "On second thought, I'll come get you. Don't need you getting caught sneaking out of your cabin. Just be ready to go at nine, okay?"

I nodded eagerly.

Fallon hopped off the window ledge and onto the ground below. "Be ready means dress and act like a spy," she whispered, "So, _please_, no squeaky shoes. Those are the worst."

"Umm, okay," I said, wondering what I had gotten myself into.

"Good, see you tomorrow."

I watched as Fallon disappeared around the back of the cabin without making a sound. Act like a spy? Wow, she wasn't kidding. I had no problem moving silently in my wolf form, but on two legs? I could do it, but definitely not as well as Fallon could. It didn't matter though because I was going to do whatever it took to see my dad.

I couldn't concentrate at all during training the next day. All I could think about was finally seeing my dad after three long months. Come four o'clock I was so jittery with excitement that I ran my ten mile loop faster than any other day, even if I still had to wait more than three hours until Fallon showed up at my window. The time of my run was the only thing my trainer was impressed with. Due to my total lack of concentration I hardly succeeded during training. In fact, I didn't succeed at allâ€¦I only managed to change the color of my coat once. And had my mind been in the right place I know I could have changed color, and maybe even shape finally, many times, instead of the one time.

I had no idea how I managed to survive the three hours between my run and when Fallon discretely knocked on my window. All I knew was that those three hours were torture.

As quietly as I could, I pulled open my bedroom window. "Hey," I said to Fallon, then gestured to my all black outfit, "Will this work?"

She stuck her head through the gap to get a better look at my whole ensembleâ€¦including the softest-soled shoes I could find. "Yeah, I suppose that'll do." She pulled her head back outside and gestured for me to follow her.

"So, tell me, why don't we just shift and sneak over there? Cause I

don't know about you, but I can be a lot quieter if I'm on four legs," I whispered as I swung my leg over the ledge and looked down to see how far the drop would beâ€"not too bad.

Fallon narrowed her eyes at me. "Do you know where we're going?"

"No," I said hesitantly.

"Do you know what kind of security they have at night?"

"No."

"Can your fluffy silver wolf coat blend in with the shadows?"

"Umm, no?" But I probably could if I had the whole changing color thing down. I ducked my head under the window and hopped down to the ground below.

"Right, so how about for now you just trust me?" Fallon said, "Come on, this way."

I followed her down around the corner to the small alley behind the row of cabins on my street. She led me down towards the main square but never entered it. Silently, we walked around the back of every building, being careful not to be seen by any guards doing their rounds. But apparently, Fallon knew all about who made what round when. She stopped me at the back of one buildingâ€"which I assumed was the grocery storeâ€"and I watched as a guard walked around the corner of the next building over.

Fallon led me all the way around the main square to the East corner where the council building was and, what I now knew was the chief's (and Taz's) house. I noticed that there were significantly fewer guards in the East corner than the other areas of the tribeâ€"perhaps the chief believed if someone were to sneak out it certainly wouldn't be to come to the East corner where they would have to face his wrath if caught.

I stopped dead in my tracks when I realized Fallon was leading me directly to the chief's house. "Hold up," I said, catching her by the arm, "we're not going in there, are we?"

Fallon looked around, exasperated. "Whatever happened to you trusting me?" she whispered harshly.

I gestured to the chief's houseâ€"which still had a light still on in two of the windowsâ€"and shot Fallon a look.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. No, we're not going in there," she said, pointing to the rather large houseâ€"well, large considering the size of the rest of the cabins. "Actually," she pointed to a smaller and much less noticeable structure behind the house, "we're going in there."

I stared at the building in front of meâ€"it didn't even look like a prison. In fact, it looked more like a small house. But it didn't matter what it looked like because my dad was inside.

Suddenly, I was extremely nervous. How was my dad going to react at seeing me? I wasn't supposed to be in the tribe. The entire reason my dad was being kept here was so that I could remain at home. What was he going to say when he discovered his sacrifice hadn't mattered—that I was still brought here? Sure, it wasn't exactly my fault—it wasn't like I could help being kidnapped—but, had I stayed at home instead of visiting Bella in Australia, or even if I had fought Taz more at the airport (because I now realized that there was no way he would have shot anyone), then maybe I wouldn't be a prisoner myself. But I hadn't. I had gone to Australia. I had let Taz take me. And, frankly, I didn't know how my dad was going to react. I would like to think that he'd be happy to see me, but that could just be wishful thinking.

"What is this place?" I whispered to Fallon.

"It's like a guest house," she answered, "Chiefs from other tribes have stayed here in the past when they've come to visit."

"Why would other chiefs come here? Isn't each tribe independent of one another?"

"Yes, but, because we are the largest tribe in the country, other chiefs like to come to see how we're run and organized." She laughed harshly. "Like there's really anything to see. No matter what they say, everyone knows we live in a dictatorship."

"What about Taz?" I asked.

"What about him?"

"Well, isn't he supposed to take over as chief in two years?"

Fallon laughed again. "The only way that'll happen is if Taz finally grows a pair," she paused, smiling to herself, "or if he steals them from his mother."

I didn't respond. I still thought Taz would make a good leader.

"This way," Fallon whispered as she turned the knob of a door on the side of the guest house.

"It's not locked?" I asked incredulously. I found it hard to believe the chief would leave the door leading to his prisoner unlocked. Maybe Fallon was playing a trick on me.

"You're forgetting: only a handful of people know your father is being kept here," Fallon said, "And besides, the chief is arrogant enough to think that no one would dare go against him."

Together we slipped inside and I shut the door behind me. It was darker without the moonlight but it didn't take long for my eyes to adjust to the new setting. The inside looked like any regular, old living room-kitchen combination: table, chairs, couch, even a refrigerator and stove. This was turning out to be nothing like the prison I'd been expecting. But then again, Fallon had said the place was sometimes used as a guest house. Part of me wondered if I'd be staying here had my father not been a prisoner.

"How is it that you are one of the people who knows where my father is?" I asked Fallon suspiciously.

Keeping her back to me as we walked across the room to a door beside the refrigerator, she responded, "You'd be surprised what you can learn when you're a social outcast. People will say all kinds of things when they don't notice you standing there."

A social outcast? Why did she consider herself a social outcast? Frankly, a lot of things Fallon said didn't make sense to me, but I kept my questions to myself. I would have time to ask her them later. Right now, I had to focus on my dad.

Fallon stopped just outside the white door. "You stay here," she whispered, "In fact, go hide in the pantry over there."

"Why? What are you going to do?"

She smiled mischievously. "I'm going to take care of the guards of course."

"Guards? How?"

Fallon rolled her eyes. I got the distinct sense that she felt like she was talking to a child. "I'm going to let them see me so they'll come after me and I can lead them away from the house. That way you can sneak downstairs and talk to your father, is that okay with you?"

"But if they see you, you'll get in trouble," I pointed out.

"So?" Fallon shrugged. "Like I told you, I live for trouble." She smiled at me again before opening the door and disappearing behind it.

A few seconds later, I heard shouts from inside. The guards must have spotted Fallon. The pounding of Fallon's footsteps on a staircase woke me from my thoughts, making me realize I was still in plain view of anyone who came through the door. Crap.

I didn't have enough time to rush over to the pantry and get the sliding door shut before the guards made it up those stairs. I quickly glanced around the kitchen, hoping to find a place to hide. The refrigerator was deep enough that if I sat atop the counter on the other side of it and tucked my knees into my chest the guards that would barrel into the room in a matter of seconds wouldn't see me—especially if Fallon led them straight out of the house. It wasn't the best idea, in fact it was probably the worst idea, but I didn't have time for anything better.

I scrambled on top of the counter and hugged my knees to my chest, holding absolutely still. I hoped my black clothing would work to make me blend into the shadows of the room.

No sooner was I safely positioned on the other side of the fridge that the door swung open once more, slamming against the wall, and Fallon rushed out closely followed by two fairly tall, fairly muscular men in robes.

"Stop!" one of them shouted to Fallon, but Fallon just smirked as she opened the door to the outside and disappeared once more.

"Come on!" the other guard said, "We can't let her get away. The chief doesn't want anyone knowing where Keller's being kept."

Dad. He was here. A breath that sounded like the beatings of a thousand moth wings escaped my mouth. Frantic, I clamped a hand over it, desperately hoping that the guards hadn't heard me, that the sound hadn't nearly been as vociferous as I thought.

The guards didn't notice. They rushed across the room and out the door in pursuit of Fallon. I didn't move for another couple seconds, making sure they were gone. Then I carefully slid down off of the counter and tiptoed around to the other side of the refrigerator to where the door with the staircase behind it was. The door was wide open and there was a small ceiling light at the bottom of the stairs. I slowly made my way down, again, not knowing what to expect.

At the bottom of the stairs I rounded the corner to find a small card table and two chairs set up outside a larger, more compact looking door. In the center of the door was a rectangular cutout, a space that was certainly smaller than a normal sheet of paper but big enough to be able to push a plate of food through.

"Dad?" I whispered in the confined space. There was shuffling from behind the holed door. I took a step towards it. Peering through the rectangular opening, I whispered again, "Dad?"

The man sitting on the cot behind the door turned to face me. "Marina?" he asked tentatively, as if he thought his ears were deceiving him. "Marina," he said again, seeing my face through the hole and rising off the small bed.

"Dad," I said, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, his eyes full of concern but not for him, for me, "What are you doing here?"

"The chief had me brought here," I told him.

"No," he said, anger rising in his voice, "We had a deal: I would come here and you would get to stay home."

"It's my fault," I said, not meeting his gaze, "I didn't stay home. I went to visit Bella in Australia without telling them."

My dad frowned. "This is not your fault, Marina," he said adamantly, "They should have never taken you away from home. They can't keep you here."

"They say they're doing it to protect me," relaying what Stephen told me during my ride to the tribe, "and when I think about it that way, they do kind of have a pointâ€”with all the hunters and stuff at home."

He shook his head firmly. "No, that is not an excuse. The entire reason Geoff and Rebekka stayed in California was to help protect you from the hunters. Besides, I'm sure your mother would have implemented some new rules for you guys after what happened last

fall."

I was silent. I didn't tell him that she didn't have to since there was never a moment where I wasn't with Geoff, Rebekka, Henry, or Tanner.

"Do you know why the chief really brought you here?" my dad asked.

I looked down at my feet. "Itâ€"it has something to do with the prophecy," I told him, my voice smaller than the opening between us.

"They told you about the prophecy?" he asked, holding a hand to his forehead, "Oh, Marina, I'm so sorry."

"Actually," I started slowly, "I didn't find out about the prophecy from the tribe."

Our gazes met once more. From the furrowed eyebrows, I could tell my dad was confused.

"I, kind of, found out from you," I said softly, then quickly jumped into the story of how I'd overheard him talking with Rebekka that first day and then how I did my own research until Valerie was able to give me a copy of the prophecy shortly after I left the hospital. "I'm sorry I didn't talk to you about it. I was afraid you'd want to pick up and move, hide me away."

He sighed. "And you wouldn't have been wrong."

"But Dad," I said carefully, "I'm starting to think I really am the one mentioned in the prophecy."

"Why would you think that?"

"You know why," I whispered, "Because I can turn into two animals."

"That doesn't mean anything," my dad said quickly, as if trying to convince himself that it couldn't possibly be true.

"You don't believe that," I told him, "I know you don't."

He didn't say anything.

"You've known about the prophecy for awhile, and I think you knew I was the one the moment I turned into a dolphin that day at the beach."

The sad smile he gave her brought her close to tears. "I just want you to be safe."

"I know," I said, returning the smile, "But, if I am the shapeshifter in the prophecy then I can't run from this."

He took my hand through the opening. "When did my baby girl get so grown up?"

I didn't answer himâ€"I didn't really have an answer for him. "There's one more thing," I said finally, "The chief and the council,

they think that I can turn into more than two animals."

My dad nodded. "When it comes to the prophecy, that has always been the belief of the tribe."

I looked down. "I'm starting to think they're right."

My dad seemed surprised by that. "Have you shifted into an animal other than a wolf or a dolphin?"

"Noâ€|not yet," I said, "But I think I can." I told him of how I had managed to change the color of my coat.

He seemed to be contemplating what I'd said. "I hate to say it, honey, but I think I agree with you." He sighed, as if his statement had taken so much out of him.

I decided not tell him how much the prospect of turning into any animal excited me now.

"You have to delay them," he said after a moment.

"What do you mean?"

There were shouts from upstairs that caused us both to freeze. I began to panic. How much time had passed? Had Fallon gotten caught? What if the guards were back already?

"Marina!"

The sound of my dad's urgent whisper broke my trance.

"Listen, even if you think you'll be able to shift into a different animal, _don't_. Take as much time in this training as possible," he said quickly.

"Why?"

"Because it'll give you more time to figure out a way to escape."

My eyes widened. Did he really think that was possible? Stephen had told to not bother running when I first arrived in the tribe, claiming that there wasn't any other civilization in the area for miles and that I would die of starvation before I found anything. Had he been lying? I thought about how my dad had been able to do it. That proved it was at least possible.

He explained further, talking quickly as the voices above us got louder. "Sebastian has always craved power. He even convinced his father to let him take over the tribe before the allocated age. That's how he views you: as another way to solidify his power."

"But isn't Yvette the one who is the real threat?"

"Yvette is a snake, yes," my dad spat bitterly, "but it's Sebastian you really need to watch out for. It may seem like he's all talk, but there's a lot more bite behind his bark than you think. The fact that he's a dragon isn't the only reason people fear him. The reason he brought you here against your will was to show everyone that no one can defy him."

"But he's already a dragon and the chief of the tribe. Who would even consider going against him?"

"A lot of people," he said, "Sebastian's new rules have aroused resentment in many people of the tribe, but for now their fear of him is greater than their discontent. The chief knows that it could take only one person to start a revolt, and he's afraid that person will be you."

"Me? Why me?"

"If you succeed in changing into any animal, you'll be infinite times more powerful than the chief. He knows that and that's why he wants you on his side. _He fears you_."

I considered that idea. It made sense. The chief was always careful to be pleasant around me. Although I never really liked him, he was nicer to me than Yvette and Stephen. "So how do we get out of here?" I asked.

"Not we," he said, "Just you."

"But I can't leave you here!"

"You can and you will," my dad said, "Marina, you are my priority. As long as you get out of here safely I will be happy."

"No. No," I repeated, shaking my head vigorously, "You have to come with me. How am I going to get out of here without you?"

"It'll be okay, justâ€"

His voice was cut off by a louder and much clearer voice from upstairs.

"You don't scare me you worthless dogs! I know what I saw down there!" I heard Fallon scream at the top of her lungs. She was being a lot louder than normal, and I took it as my warning to get out of there.

"Go! You can't be caught down here," my dad told me.

I listened to him, turning away but not before whispering, "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, honey," he responded.

I tiptoed back up the stairs and peeked out at the first floor. The door Fallon and I had come in, across the room, was wide open and outside stood Fallon with the two guards. She was waving her hands and no doubt complaining about something to themâ€"definitely being as dramatic as possible.

I glanced around the room for a different way out. Crouching low, I crawled over to a window on the opposite side of the house from where Fallon and the two guards stood, turning the lock and silently sliding it open. I mentally sent Fallon all my gratitude as I slipped myself through the window and closed it again.

8. The Marina Menagerie

****Hi everyone! Sorry about the later update. This chapter took me longer than I expected, that, and of course life just got in the way. I hope you can forgive me! Anywho, hope you like this chapter! Oh, and to the guest who asked about Jet: don't worry, he'll be backâ€|**_**very**_** soon ;)****

If someone were to ask me how I got back to my cabin last night, I wouldn't have been able to answer them. Of course, there wasn't anyone to ask me that question since the only person who knew I had even snuck out was Fallon. I seriously couldn't understand how I managed to find my way back in the dark without Fallon to guide me. It definitely took me longer than it did to get over to the East corner in the first place, but that was only because I was extra careful around every corner for fear of running into any guards and I went too far past the main square, ending up in the North corner before realizing I had to backtrack. What amazed me even more was that I had managed to get back to my cabin without being caught by any guards. Either the two guards by the guest house had called in reinforcements to catch Fallon or I was just lucky, because I didn't run into one guard.

I didn't sleep at all that night. I kept going over the conversation I'd had with my dad in my head. I had to escapeâ€no, _we_ had to escape. I didn't care what he said. We were both going to get out of here. The problem was I had no idea how. We'd been cut off before he could tell me how he'd done it the first time and all the ideas I came up with while lying awake in bed would certainly get me caught.

I wanted to visit my dad again but it became clear the next morning that that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. For breaking curfew, Fallon had been given compost duty for a weekâ€a job that was apparently worse than collecting trash on the back of a garbage truckâ€and restricted access across town. I wasn't exactly sure what the second punishment meant, but I had a feeling that Fallon would find a way around it.

I felt bad that she had been punished because of me, but when I passed by her in the town square on my way to training the next morning, our eyes met for a second and she winked at me. We both quickly looked away after that and I hurried towards the South corner, smiling to myself. Had I really found a friend in Fallon, of all people? I had, and, for the first time since arriving at the tribe, I was happy.

During training, I did as my dad asked, and never really tried to shift into another animal. But, just so my trainer didn't get angry, I did change the color of my coat a few times. I could tell he was frustrated, and, truthfully, so was I. Even though I wasn't supposed to be trying, I still wanted to prove that I _could_ shift into any animalâ€if not to the chief and the council, but to myself.

I hoped to see Fallon that night after I got home from training, but she didn't show up at my window. I wanted to tell her what my dad had said about escaping. After exhausting every possibility I could think of for escape, I realized that I couldn't do it alone, and Fallon was definitely the best person to askâ€after last night, I could tell

she knew the ins and outs of the tribe better than maybe even the chief himself. That, and the fact that she was the only person I trusted at the moment convinced me to confide in her.

It wasn't until four days after I talked to my dad that I got to talk to Fallon again. She appeared late one night, knocking lightly at my window, like a secret lover. Somehow, when I imagined someone sneaking into my bedroom in the middle of the night, I imagined it would be a guy, not some quick-quipped rebel girl.

"Hey," I whispered as I pulled open my window to let her inside. It had started snowing again—the leftovers from the last snow storm barely had time to melt. Briefly, I wondered if the tribe had snow days and if there was any chance my training, or at least my early morning run, would be cancelled. Living towards the more Southern end of California, I'd never had a snow day, and the possibility of one excited me. But, at the same time, having seen how normally the tribe functions with half a foot of compact snow on the ground, I didn't want to get my hopes up.

The constant snow also made me wonder where the tribe was located—again. It was information I needed if I was going to escape—I only had a hundred dollars cash (and twenty Australian dollars) in my wallet, and, if I was on the other side of the country, I didn't think that would last me the trip home. The presence of snow would have given me a better clue about my whereabouts had it not been the beginning of February and half the country was expected to be experiencing winter.

"I had no idea they cared so much," Fallon said in a mocking and slightly annoyed tone.

I had no idea what she was talking about or who they were. But, thankfully, I didn't have to ask—Fallon just kept talking.

"They usually just ignore me—pretend not to notice me, but as soon as I get caught breaking curfew they suddenly see me. It's like I've lost my invisibility cloak or something," she huffed, "I want it back."

"They really ignore you?" I asked, trying best to sound skeptical, but it was difficult—I had witnessed the way people's eyes seemed to pass through Fallon and instead focus right on Fawn.

She ruffled her hair and the snow on top of her red hair melted into the strands. "Oh they do," she said, "or, at least, they did. People avoided me like the plague. Now all the guards watch my every move. How can you stand it?"

"It is very annoying," I agreed.

"That's an understatement."

I was about to ask Fallon why people would avoid her so much but she moved on before I could get a word out.

"So you did get to talk to your dad, right?"

I nodded.

"Cool, uhhâ€¦prison life treatin' him well?" she asked, sounding awkward and unsure for the first time since I'd met her, "I mean, he was being kept in a house so it couldn't have been that badâ€¦"

"Fallon," I said, interrupting her, "he told me to escape."

"Let's do it."

I don't know what I was expecting her to say but it wasn't that. Maybe something more along the lines of "you're crazy, even I can't get you out of here", or something like that.

"But isn't it going to be impossible?" I plopped down on my bed.

"Probably," Fallon shrugged, "but that doesn't mean we shouldn't try. Don't you want to get out of here?"

"Of course I do."

Fallon raised her eyebrows at me, silently demanding that I tell the truth.

"Butâ€¦I kind of do want to get this transforming into any animal thing down," I said sheepishly. Despite being forced to come to the tribe against my will, I had to admit I was intriguedâ€¦noâ€¦I was enamored with the idea of turning into any animal I wanted. It was something that had never crossed my mind, and probably never would have had I not been brought to the tribe. And yet, I promised my dad that I wouldn't make any real progress with my shapeshiftingâ€¦at least not in front of any tribe members.

Fallon studied me like she was weighing something in her mind. "Having you able to turn into any animal could prove useful for getting out of hereâ€¦" she started, then seemingly making a decision, she continued, "I think I can help you with that."

Despite my excitement at the possibility of actually being able to try shapeshifting into other animals again, I couldn't help but recognize the flaw in Fallon teaching me. "How?" I asked, "I've already reviewed every shapeshifting technique known with my trainer, plus some I didn't even know existed, with next to no results. What do you know that he doesn't?"

"Everything," she said, "Trust me."

"Okay," I said, slightly suspicious but willing to trust Fallon for once, "so let's say we do manage to find a way out of here, how am I going to make it back to civilization? They told me when I first got here that I would die of starvation before I made it to another town."

"I think that's where your ability to turn into any animal will come in handy," Fallon said thoughtfully, "Besides, as long as you head in the right direction, I think you'll be fine."

"Yeahâ€¦" I didn't tell Fallon this but I wanted something a little more concrete than thinking I would be fine. "Anyway, about the shapeshifting trainingâ€¦"

"Well, we'll have to find a time that fits into your busy schedule," Fallon said, smirking at me.

I glared back at her. As if it was my fault I never had any time during the day. "I'm free after six," I told her, "Actually, make that seven. Yvette and Sebastian always look for me at dinner so they'd get suspicious if I didn't show up."

"Fine," Fallon nodded, "I'll meet you in the gym tomorrow at 7:30."

"The gym?" I asked, "Are you sure no one will see us?"

Fallon rolled her eyes. "Does anyone come in when you're training during the day?"

"No, well, except for Taz."

"Exactly," she stated, "No one ever uses that gym. We'll be fine." And with that, she left, climbing back through my window.

But Fallon and I didn't get to meet the next night, or the night after that. We both overestimated the guards' willingness to leave us alone. It wasn't until three days later that the guards decided Fallon had served her punishment, finally taking their eyes off of her once again. Me, on the other hand, it seemed was never going to get so lucky. I realized that the only way I was going to get to the gym was if I told my guards the truth. So, I told them I was going to the gym for extra training and they graciously escorted me there. Of course, they had no idea Fallon was the one waiting for me on the inside.

"I'll be back at my cabin by nine," I told the guard when we reached the entrance to the gym.

He studied me for a moment before telling me that he would pick me up at ten to nine and escort me back to my cabin. I nodded, not bothering to argue—"at least he was willing to leave me alone for over an hour.

"Fallon?" I whispered as I entered the dark gym. The place definitely looked creepier at night. I could see why people tended to avoid it.

"Over here," she called from across the room, "God, you can talk normally you know. You make it sound like we're doing something illegal."

"Aren't we?" I asked, shoving my hands in the pocket of my robe (or what used to be Fallon's robe) as I walked up to her.

Fallon shrugged. "Actually, I think this is the least illegal thing we've done since we met," she said, "If anything I think the chief would be proud that you're taking extra time to train."

I nodded. "Okay, so what you want me to do?"

"What have you done with your trainer?"

"Mostly mind exercises," I told her, "You know, picturing the animal, imagining what it would be like to be that animal."

"What animal have you been focusing on?"

"A dog," I said, "specifically my friend's chocolate lab."

Fallon groaned. "_That_", she said, "is part of your problem."

"What do you mean?"

"The first animal you turned into was a wolf, right?" she asked.

"Right."

"So, a dog is _way_ too close in relation to a wolf. You can't shift into a dog because your body can't differentiate between the two yet." She paced around in a circle.

I had never thought about it that way. My trainer had always assumed a dog would be easy because I was so familiar with a wolf and I agreed with him. But now, I realized how wrong he was, and how right Fallon was.

"A wolf and a dolphin are nothing alike"well, except for the fact that they're both mammals. That's why it is so easy for you to turn into each one. It's easy to tell the difference."

What she was saying made so much sense. Maybe she did know more than I thought.

"Tell me what happened when you first turned into a dolphin," Fallon said, turning back to me.

I then proceeded to tell her about the shell in the ocean and swimming with my family. The more she listened the more she seemed to perk up.

Smiling, she said, "I think I know what we have to do."

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for an answer. What did I have to do to be able to shift into any animal?

Fallon rushed over to the other side of the gym where some regular workout equipment was kept. She beckoned me to follow and I did, curious. If she expected me to build up my strength with the equipment then she was crazy. From my hours with my trainer, I knew working out didn't make me shift.

"Okay," Fallon said, "look around. What do you see?"

"A bunch of workout equipment?"

"Yes, but let's say someone barges in here right now wanting to kill you"ooh! Say it's a hunter!"

The color drained from my face and I looked down at the ground at Fallon's mention of hunters. I hadn't told her about what had really happened that day in the woods or Brad. In fact, I hadn't even told

her about Jet. I hoped she either didn't notice my reaction, or just shrugged it off as a general fear of hunters.

"Alright, so a hunter comes in here looking to kill you. What do you do?" Fallon asked, excitement nearly pouring out of her ears.

"Umm, either run out the door or shift and attack him, hoping for the best," I said, staring at her as if she was crazy. "I couldn't help it." I had no idea where she was going with this.

She shook her head furiously. "No!" she exclaimed, "You make him think you're not here!"

"Uhh, how do I do that?"

Fallon rolled her eyes at me. "she seemed to do that a lot. "You _hide_."

I glanced around the room and frowned. The gym was one big open space, minus the workout equipment, which happened to only be a couple medicine balls, yoga mats, and two treadmills. There were absolutely no places to hide.

"Fallon," I said, truly starting to wonder if she'd gone crazy, "Not even a dwarf could hide in here. You'd have to be as small as a mouse." I stopped midsentence when what she was saying finally hit me.

Fallon smiled at me. "The key to your shapeshifting lies in your instinct," she said, "You have to need to shift into these animals, just like you did when you wanted to get that seashell on the ocean floor."

I smiled back at her. "So," I started, "If a hunter chased me in here, then to escape him all I would have to do would be to shift into a mouse and hide under the treadmill."

"Exactly," Fallon agreed, "Different animals can help you in different situations."

She was absolutely right. How had no one realized that this could possibly be the most useful shapeshifting technique ever? How had Fallon discovered it?

A question that was on the tip of my tongue slipped loose. "Fallon?" I asked, "How did you figure this out?"

She shrugged, trying to make her discovery seem insignificant. "I spent years training to shift." There was something behind her answer that made me think she wasn't telling me the whole truth. It was then that I realized there was one important thing about Fallon that I didn't know. "something that, in the tribe, was very odd."

"And, what animal can you turn into?"

She turned her back to me and was quiet for a minute. Then I saw her breath a heavy sigh before she spoke again. I had never heard Fallon sound so vulnerable. "I-I. I don't," she said finally.

"What do you mean?" I asked in a whisper.

She whipped back around to face me, on the brink of tears. "I don't turn into any animal." She gestured to her figure. "This is all there is. It's just me."

I couldn't believe it. The reason Fallon knew so much about shapeshifting was because she had desperately tried to get her body to shift into an animal, any animal. Fallon lived in the tribe, she had a twin sister who could turn into a fox, probably everyone she knew could turn into an animal, but she couldn't. In a town full of shapeshifters, she was the only one who wasn't a shapeshifter.

"May-maybe you're just a late bloomer?" I said softly.

She laughed bitterly at that. "I don't think so, Marina," she said, "I passed that mark three years ago. Everyone knows that fifteen is the age that your body forces you to shift, if you're a shapeshifter."

I did know that. I had seen it in action when I saw Jet's body force him to shift two years ago. "But, how is this even possible?" I asked, "Aren't both your parents shapeshifters?"

"Yeah," Fallon responded, "No one has a clue what's wrong with me. That's why everyone avoids me. They're afraid that my inability to shapeshift will someone pass to them or their children."

"That's ridiculous," I said, "The ability to shapeshift isn't a disease, it's genetic."

"Yeah, we've always known that, but still people are scared. I'm a freak."

"No you're not," I said quickly, "If anything, I'm the freak. Shifting into any animal? Hell, shifting into two animals. It's unheard of."

Fallon chuckled softly. "Well, I guess we can be freaks together."

I nodded, smiling at her.

She wiped her eyes and when she looked up at me her vulnerable side had retreated back inside her. Once again, all I saw was badass Fallon. "Alright," she said firmly, "now let's test that hunter and mouse scenario."

I closed my eyes and imagined the scene. I imagined being chased by a hunter—it wasn't hard to do—I had had to run from hunters (specifically Brad) plenty of times before. In my mind, I heard the click of his gun, the pounding of feet, his (and my) labored breathing. I told myself that all I had to do to escape him was to hide, to be able to hide under the treadmill.

Bang! The sound of the gym door slamming shook me from my thoughts. I looked to see Fallon smiling and standing next to the door. I practically jumped out of my skin at the sound, she scared me so bad.

She was still smiling as she walked over to me, her figure growing in

size with every step.

"What the hell, Fallon?!" I yelled at her, "What were you thinking? You scared me half to death!"

She didn't answer me, she just kept smiling. When did Fallon get so tall?

"Fallon!" I shouted again. That was when I realized I wasn't actually talking. There was sound coming out of my mouth, but it wasn't in the form of words: it was in the form of small squeaks.

Excitement pulsed through me as I slowly turned my head down to look at my feet. They were a tannish, pink color and had tiny claw-like toes attached. They weren't human. They weren't even wolf. They were mouse feet.

I did it.

Squealing uncontrollably, I shifted back into my human form and rushed forward to hug Fallon.

"You did it!" she shouted.

"We did it!" We both laughed as we continued to hug.

By the time 8:50 rolled around, besides my usual wolf and dolphin, I managed to shift into a mouse, a frog, and a monkey. I knew after only a few more nights of training and I would truly be able to turn into any animal. It was the first time I felt hopeful in weeks.

9. Rescuer

****Thank you to everyone who reviewed! You are the best! Wow, this is my longest chapter yetâ€"over 4,000 wordsâ€"certainly didn't expect that. For those who submitted characters a little while back, I didn't forget about you. The next round of characters will appear in the story in about five chapters or so. I will probably let you know who those characters are going to be in the next three chapters. Anyway, I hope everyone really likes reading this chapter! I know I had a good time writing it ;)*****

I was right. Two days later, I could shift into any animal I wanted. It was amazing. The only problem was, was that I couldn't share my success with anyone. I wanted to tell my dad but there was no way I was going to get in to see him anytime soon, besides I knew it would be best if I stayed clear of him until Fallon and I actually hatched a plan to escape. Recently, however, escaping had taken a backseat in my mind. Of course, I still wanted to get out of the tribe, and, since I had now mastered my shifting abilities, I had a better chance of getting me and my dad out, but, for the past few days, all I could think about was shifting.

Even while I was training with my trainer, all I could think about was sneaking back into the gym later that night to really practice my shifting. Fallon had devised a game slash exercise for me where she would yell the name of an animal and I would have turn into the animal that would have the best chance of beating Fallon's animal in a fight or evading that animal. I have to admit I was horrible at it

at first, but I got better. Now, when she screams rabbit, I turn into a fox. When she screams cheetah, I turn into a lionâ€"because, while cheetahs are fast, they can't maintain that speed for a long time and lions are much stronger than cheetahs. The only one that stumped me (at first) was when she screamed dragon. After about a minute, I realized that the best animal to fight a dragon was probably a dragon.

Needless to say, Fallon was impressed by that. She didn't say so of course, but I could tell by the pure "wow" on her face.

My regular training sessions were absolute torture. I felt bad for deceiving my trainer and consistently failing. I hated seeing the desolate look on his face each time I shifted into my wolf form, different colored coat or not. But I had made a promise to my dad, and I wasn't about to break it just to see my trainer smile.

On the other hand, I had a feeling Taz was getting suspicious of me. These days, when he came in to watch my training sessions, he wouldn't talk to me, he'd just stand by the door and stare. He watched me like he was studying my emotions and not my shifting abilities. Whenever he was around I did my best to seem very frustrated, but I didn't think he bought my act. Although, at the same time, he never said anything to me about it.

It was my fourth day of pretending not to know how to shift into any animal, when my usual routine was interrupted. In the middle of the afternoon, Taz appeared in the doorway. Since he often came to observe, I didn't think anything of it. I just continued not shifting.

"Sorry to interrupt, Ryan," Taz said, addressing my trainer, "But I am to escort Marina back to her cabin immediately."

I turned to look at him frowning. Why on earth would I need to go back to my cabin now? I was in the middle of a training session. Wasn't my training the most important thing to the chief?

"Of course," my trainer responded, not arguing in the slightest.

What was going on?

Taz didn't offer any explanation. He just opened the gym door and beckoned for me to follow him outside.

I ran forward, my breath leaving clouds in front of me from the chilly air. "Taz," I said, walking beside him, "What's going on?"

We quickly reached the center square, and he pressed his lips together for a second before answering. "Unfortunately, I can't tell you, Marina."

"Why not?"

He didn't respond.

I looked around at all the people in the tribe. Many were hurrying past us, towards the entrance to the Southern corner. "Taz!" I said, raising my voice a bit, "I think I deserve to know why I'm being

locked in my cabin in the middle of the afternoon."

He sighed, resigning. "Yeah, but I still can't tell you the reason."

It was moments like these that I wondered whether or not I could really trust Taz. Aside from Fallon, he was definitely the only friend I had in the tribe, but he also had a duty to his father and the tribe as its future leader—"something I could tell he took very seriously.

"Just know that I'm doing this for your protection," Taz told me as we climbed the steps of my cabin. My usual two guards were positioned outside the house.

I glared at him. "Not good enough," I said, walking inside and closing the door to him.

I ran to my room and looked out the window, making sure no one was around that side of the house. As quietly as I could, I slid the window open about six inches and then removed Fallon's robe, shifting into a small—and unnoticeable—sparrow. One thing I had yet to master was flying. I didn't know how Skye did it. Flying was very hard. Running, swimming—easy. Flying? Not so much.

However, I had managed to figure out how to take flight and stay there for more than a couple seconds. I just hoped that would be enough to get me from my cabin to the Southern corner once more without anyone getting suspicious. Then again, as far as the tribe was concerned, I had yet to shift into anything other than a wolf and dolphin.

I hopped up to the windowsill and ducked outside. Spreading my little wings as far as they would go, I jumped. Normally, the jump from my window wouldn't have been so bad, but, being a tiny bird who had yet to master flying, the drop to the ground looked terrifying. I had never appreciated the bravery of baby birds until that moment.

For half a second, I thought I was actually falling and I almost shifted back into human form before my wings caught me, allowing me to drift a bit in the alley. I flapped my wings, pushing the air beneath me, and began to climb. Thankfully, I managed to reach the roof of the cabin next to me before my wings failed me. From the roof I could see a crowd around the path to the Southern corner. I had to get over there.

I did my best to hop to the edge of the roof on the other side then jumped once more, desperately hoping I would make it to the next roof. I did. After that, hopping from roof to roof got easier. It took about five minutes for me to make it to the roof of one of the buildings in the Southern corner, but, thankfully, the crowd was still gathered there, so, whoever (or whatever) they were waiting for hadn't come by yet.

I waited with them, straining to see as far down the walkway into the Southern corner as possible. I knew the entrance to the tribe was at the tip of the Southern corner. Was somebody else coming to visit the tribe? Was it another chief? Was that why Taz had said I needed to stay in my cabin for my own safety? What if other tribal leaders had been trying to capture me all along? Or maybe the outer guards had

just discovered another trespasser slash prisoner like Drew? But then why would I have to stay in my cabin?

Below me, the other members of the tribe whispered fervently to each other. Apparently they were as clueless as I was.

A few minutes later, silence spread across the crowd as the chief appeared at the end of the path—and he wasn't alone. Following behind him was a slew of guards. I searched the pack of guards for the newcomer.

I nearly fell off the roof when I found him.

He wore a typical shifting robe and his hands were tied behind his back, forcing the robe to part some in the front, revealing a v-shaped section of his muscular chest. His hair was ruffled and messy, with the occasional twig or pine needle sticking out, as if he had been wandering the woods for many days. There was no emotion visible on his face, though his gorgeous green eyes darted every which way.

Jet had found me.

I felt like I might explode with happiness. I wanted nothing more than to fly down off that roof into his arms. But I couldn't, for more than one reason: the most important being that no one could know that I could shift into other animals.

So this was why I had been rushed back to my cabin.

The chief no doubt recognized Jet from last fall (and also probably suspected that he'd come to the tribe looking for me) and realized that neither Jet nor I could know the other was in the tribe. I couldn't help but ruffle my feathers at the thought. Who did Sebastian think he was keeping Jet's presence from me?

At the entrance to the main square the procession stopped. I saw Yvette and Taz step forward as the chief moved to stand beside his wife and son. The guards parted to allow Jet to see who stood before him.

"Welcome," I heard the chief say, "I am Sebastian, the chief of this tribe—as I'm sure you remember—this is my wife, Yvette, and our son, Theodore." Jet muttered something that I couldn't hear.

"Please state your name and the reason for your visit," Yvette commanded, pleasantness completely forgotten—or, maybe, she never possessed any in the first place.

This time, I clearly heard Jet's response.

"My name is John Holden," he said, sounding like he was making an opening statement for the debate team rather than introducing himself to a whole town of people, "and I have come here to learn about tribal life and my ancestry."

Taz frowned in confusion. "Your ancestry?" he asked, voicing what I was sure was the question floating around everyone else's head.

"I am Deirdre's son," Jet said.

A buzz of whispers erupted amongst the townspeople. I could only imagine what they were thinking. First, my dad turns up alive and now Jet turns up claiming to be Deirdre's son. The only two people to successfully runaway from the tribe (aside from Jet's aunt and cousin, Valerie and Kelsey), were suddenly reappearing in some way to the tribe. I managed to catch snippets of what some people were saying.

"Deirdre?" the woman nearest to me asked her husband, "Valerie's older sister?"

"The one who was able to escape?" another asked, jumping in the conversation.

"Yeah, she and Mark were the only to escape from the tribe," the husband answered.

"Except, the chief caught Mark."

"He can't really be her son."

"No, no. I think he is. I knew Deirdre, and he looks a lot like her."

"That doesn't mean he is."

"Do you think Deirdre's still out there somewhere?"

"Do you think that's why Valerie ran away during the exhibition? To find her sister?"

"Maybe. But Deirdre disappeared over twenty years ago."

Nobody seemed to know what to make of Jet's sudden appearance. I didn't care what they thought though. I was just happy to see him. Even if he had come here to find out more about his mother, I was determined to leave with him when the time came.

"Everyone quiet!" Sebastian shouted over the steadily increasing roar of the crowd. Everyone immediately stopped talking. I bet the teachers at my high school would love to have the power to silence their students the way the chief did.

"Mr. Holden," Yvette said formerly, "You cannot simply waltz in here, claiming to be a tribe member's son." I easily picked up on how Yvette referred to Deirdre as a current member of the tribe, despite her disappearance. But for once, Yvette seemed rather keen on not having Jet stay in the tribe. Did she know that Jet and I knew each other? Had Sebastian told her? I could only assume he had, given the fact that it had been Taz who had escorted me back to my cabin.

"He is Deirdre's son," came a voice from the crowd, one I didn't recognize. I watched as an older woman, with stark white hair, pushed her way to the front of the pack. "I recognized him immediately for who he was," the woman continued, "He bares such a striking resemblance to Deirdre. For a moment, I thought he was her."

I stared at the woman. She kept one eye on Jet, while her other seemed to be daring Yvette to say something else. On the other hand,

she didn't look particularly happy to see Jet, merely surprised.

"Tamara," Yvette started, but she didn't get to finish because the old woman cut her off.

"There is no reason for him not to be welcomed here as one of our own.

"Tammy is right, Yvette," the chief said, "I witnessed his shapeshifting abilities only moments ago. He is aâ€"rather magnificentâ€"black wolf. We have no reason not to let him stay."

I smiled to myselfâ€"for the first time since I met the guy, I finally agreed with the chief on something.

"I know that my mother lived here until her late teens," Jet said, directly at Yvette, "and that she could shift into a German Shepherd."

The chief smiled at Jet, but the smile was as fake as could be. I was sure he was only hoping Jet had a location on Deirdreâ€"well, he was going to be very disappointedâ€"unless, of course, Jet had discovered more about his real mother since I left for Australia. "See?" the chief said, still smiling, "He is Deirdre's son, and is therefore welcome to stay here as a guest for as long as he likes."

"And, as he is a guest," Tammy said, emphasizing the word guest, and stepping forward once more, "in the tribe, he will need a place to stay." She smiled sincerely at Jet. "I would like to propose that he stay with me in my cabin, as I would like some time to get to know my grandson."

Jet's eyes widened in surprise at Tammy's statement, as I was sure mine had. Apparently, he hadn't considered the fact that he might still have a grandmother alive in the tribe.

The chief considered Jet's grandmother for a moment, but then his expression softened. "I think that is a great idea," he said while, next to him, Yvette scowled.

That was when someone else stepped forward. "Excuse me?" she said, batting her eyelashes at Jet like someone typing out a message on a telegraph, "but I would love to give John a tour of the tribe." Fawn smiled sweetlyâ€"or as sweetly someone like her couldâ€"at Sebastian and Yvette.

Oh hell no.

On the one hand, I was glad that Fawn had finally realized she didn't have a chance with Tazâ€"he deserved someone so much better than herâ€"but on the other, she had set her sights on Jet. And there was no way I was going to let her get close enough to even breath on him, nevermind touch him.

"Uhh, Fawn? Don't you think his grandmother would like to show him around?" Fallon said, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at her twin.

Thank you, Fallon! She had saved me again. I was beginning to lose

count of the number of times she's come to my rescue.

"I agree with the young lady," Tammy said, "I would like to be the one to show my grandson our home."

Fawn shot an equally hateful glare back at Fallon, which, she ignored.

"It's settled then!" the chief exclaimed, clapping his hands together. I took that as my cue to leave—I had to get back to my cabin before anyone realized I was gone.

//*

I pretty much spent the rest of the day pacing in my room. More than once I considered sneaking out again to find Jet, but I knew that, one way or another, that would end badly. I just hoped that Fallon would come to visit me tonight so I could talk her into smuggling me into Jet's grandmother's cabin. I had a good feeling she would gladly help me.

Around six-thirty, I walked hopefully out the front door of my cabin to head to dinner. However small, there was always a chance I would see Jet sometime between when I left the cabin to when I returned. But my hope deflated faster than a balloon spiraling out of air, when my usual two guards blocked my path.

"Your dinner will be brought to your cabin tonight," one said.

"You are to wait inside until it is delivered," the other added when he noticed I wasn't moving.

I narrowed my eyes at both of them, but complied. My dinner arrived half an hour later, but I was too anxious to eat much. I stuck my leftovers—aka most of my meal—in the fridge of the small kitchenette in the corner of the room and returned to my pacing.

It was then that a horrible thought occurred to me: what if Jet didn't _want_ to see me? We hadn't exactly been on the best of terms when I left for Australia, given my conflicted feelings for Brad. In fact, my shaky friendships with both guys had been one of the reasons I practically ran away to Australia.

A little after eight, I heard Fallon climbing through the window into my bedroom. I ran to her, throwing the door open in my haste and startling her. "Fallon!" I exclaimed as she stumbled into the room, "I need your help."

She looked up at me with one eyebrow raised. "Oh?" she mocked, "and which of my services do you require today, oh great one?"

Ever since I started shifting into any and every animal, Fallon has jokingly treated me as royalty. "Stop it," I said, "This is serious."

"Alright, alright," she said, holding up her hands, "What's wrong?"

"I need you to get me into Tammy's house to see John," I told her, "and I need it to be tonight."

"Your wish is my command, my liege," she said, bowing.

I rolled my eyes at herâ€”something that was probably a firstâ€”it always seemed to be the other way around. "Come on, I really need your help."

"Okay, I think I can get you in there," she started, "but you'll need to fit in my jacket pocket." She pulled open her pocket to show me the size of the hole in the fabric.

"I think I can do that."

"So, can I ask why you want to see this John guy?"

I couldn't help but blush at her question. "He'sâ€”uhhâ€”kind of my best friend turned boyfriend."

"And you didn't tell me about him?" Fallon asked, outraged, "I thought we were friends!"

"Well, it's kind of an awkward situation," I relented, "We're taking a break right nowâ€”because I may or may not have feelings for another guy."

Fallon whistled. "Oooh, Marinaâ€”"

"I know, I know," I said, cutting her off, "That's not even the worst part."

"What could be worse than having feelings for two different guys?" she asked.

"How completely different the two guys are."

Fallon frowned, not understanding.

Grimacing, I continued. "You already know John is a shapeshifter." Fallon nodded. "Well, the other guy, Brad, is kind of a-shapeshifter-hunter-who-knows-what-I-am-and-love s-me-anyway," I said, the words rushing from my lips like rapids.

Fallon's mouth dropped open. "You're in love with a hunter?" she whispered.

I nodded shamefully. "I'm in love with a hunter and a shapeshifter."

"Who are you going to choose?" Fallon asked, "Cause, you know, you have to pick one of them eventually."

"I know," I said, "but every time I come close to making a decision, I remember that I will lose the other one."

Fallon smiled sadly at me for a moment before she started chuckling.

"What is it?" I asked, incredulously.

"Your life could be a soap opera," she said between laughs.

I smiled at thatâ€"she was right. "Okay," I said finally, "So are we going to do this or not?"

"Yeah," Fallon shrugged, "Just shift into something small and I'll stick you in my pocket."

"How are you going to get inside?" I asked her. I felt like that was a perfectly valid question, considering the way she secretly met with me was to sneak in my bedroom window, and I didn't want her doing that to Jet. It would probably get us caught.

She looked at me as if I was a dumb blonde or something. "I'm going to knock on the door and ask to talk to John," she said, as if it was the most obvious answer.

"Jet," I said automatically.

"What?"

"Jet," I said again, "Get his grandmother to invite you inside, and then ask to talk to him privately, but be sure to call him Jet."

"Why?"

"It's my nickname for him," I explained, "If you call him that, he'll know we're friends and he'll make more of an effort to get you two alone to talk."

"Are you sure?" Fallon asked, her expression full of doubt.

"Positive," I said, "There are only two people in the world who call him Jetâ€"and the other is currently on another continent."

Heaving a great sigh, Fallon said, "Okay, well let's do this then."

I nodded and shifted into a mouseâ€"the only animal I could think of that would be small enough to fit in Fallon's pocket. The walk to Tamara's cabin wasn't shortâ€"she must live in a different cornerâ€"but I couldn't peek out to see which one in case someone spotted me. Thankfully no one stopped Fallon. She informed me that things had returned to normalâ€"that is, everyone ignored her once moreâ€"and, since she wasn't out past curfew, she didn't expect anyone to stop her.

Despite the long walk, Fallon was climbing steps and knocking on a front door much too soon. I could feel my tiny heart beating frantically against my chest. What if this didn't work? What if Jet's grandmother refused to leave him alone with Fallon? Should I reveal myself then? Would Tamara tell someone that I had finally learned to control my shifting?

The door opened and the porch was illuminated, the light pouring in through the fabric of Fallon's jacket.

"Hello, Tammy," Fallon greeted the old woman pleasantly.

"Hello, Fallon," I heard Jet's grandmother respond, "What brings you here?"

"Well, you see, I thought I would stop by to introduce myself to John. While he may not be staying long, I figured he might want to meet some kids his own age—you know, so he can get a better idea of what life was like for his mother here," Fallon said, lying rather easily. I was impressed—she even put the right amount of teenage embarrassment into her explanation.

I held my breath waiting for Tammy to answer.

"How thoughtful," Tammy said, "Come on in." I sighed in relief.

Fallon walked inside and I heard someone, I'm guessing Tammy, close the door behind her. "Hi," Fallon said, addressing someone else, "I'm Fallon."

"John," I heard Jet say and my heart skipped a beat—he was so close—this time I could literally reach out and touch him, "nice to meet you."

"Do you think I could talk to you alone for a few minutes, Jet?" Fallon asked.

If Jet was taken aback by the use of his nickname, I didn't know. In my head, I begged him to do what Fallon asked. I thought that surely the nickname would work.

"Of course," Jet said.

Fallon walked into another room and I heard Jet enter in behind her. Once he had closed the door, Fallon fished me out of her pocket.

"What do you—what is that?" Jet asked, spotting the mouse (aka me) in Fallon's hand. Ignoring Jet, she placed me down on the bed and stepped back.

I looked up at him. Finally, he was right there.

I shifted back into my human form and rushed forward, throwing my arms around him. He wrapped his own arms tightly around me, holding me to him as if he never wanted to let me go. I buried my face in the nape of his neck and took a deep breath in—I was home at last.

****Okay, so who missed Jet? I know I did :)****

10. Prison Break

****Thank you thank you thank you for all the reviews! You guys obviously missed Jet as much as I did ;) Okay, next chapter—here we go!****

After a few seconds of clinging to Jet, I became aware to two things. One: Jet and I were supposed to be taking a break. And two: I was naked.

Oops.

I reluctantly began to pull away from Jet. Very slowly, his hands ran across my back, releasing me from his embraceâ€”apparently he was just as reluctant to end our hug as I was.

I turned to Fallon who threw the blanket from the bed around me and shot me a smirk that seemed to say, "a hard time choosing, huh?" I ignored it. Pulling the blanket tightly around me I looked up at Jetâ€”who glanced at me while shoving his hands in his pocketsâ€”and said the first thing that popped into my mind, "Hi."

"Hi," he said, smiling at me. Fallon plopped down on the bed, resting her chin on her fist, as if she was watching a very interesting play. The smile dropped from Jet's face. I tried to ignore Fallon and focus on him instead.

"You're here."

I squeezed my lips together. "I am."

"And you're a mouse," Jet said hesitantly, rocking back on his heels.

"Yeah," I said softly, glancing at the floor, "A lot has changed since I left."

He raised his eyebrows, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I can see that."

I looked up at him but couldn't hold his gaze for more than a few seconds. I took a deep breath to try and steady my nerves. "Actually," I started, "things changed back in November."

Jet's mouth turned down in a frown. "What do you mean?"

I turned away from him and began pacing around the small roomâ€”after spending almost all afternoon pacing, the motion felt comfortingâ€”and I needed a little comfort for this conversation. "Uhh, remember the prophecy we overheard Rebekka and my dad talking about?"

He nodded. "Rebekka was convinced that you were the one the prophecy talked about because you could turn into two animals."

On the bed, Fallon scoffed, but quickly turned it into a cough when I shot her a death glare. "It's called the Porias Prophecy, and it mentions a shapeshifter 'of many forms,'" I told him.

"And you think you're the shapeshifter it's talking about?" Jet asked.

I didn't answer him. I just kept pacing. I didn't think I was the one anymore, I knew I was.

Jet grabbed my arm, stopping my rhythmic movement, and pulled me back to him. "Marina, you don't seriously think it's you, do you?"

"Jet," I started, "You just saw me shift from a mouse. You already

know I can change into a wolf and a dolphin. Even that isn't supposed to be possible."

He ran his hands down my arms until they reached my wrists. "So you can turn into three animals instead of one? That's notâ€" "

"It's more than that."

"What do you mean?"

"Ugh!" Fallon exclaimed, standing up off the bed, "Is everyone from California as slow as you two?"

Jet and I both glared at her.

"'One of many forms,'" Fallon said slowly, "As in she can turn into any animal."

Jet's head snapped back to me at Fallon's wordsâ€"his expression silently asking me if Fallon was lying.

"It's true," I said, pursing my lips, then began listing the animals I had successfully turned into, "I can shift into a mouse, a frog, a monkey, virtually any type of cat or dog, a horse, a dragon, a snakeâ€"although I have to say I did not like being a snakeâ€"having no appendages was really weird." I gave him a half-smile.

He just stared at me, eyes wide. "A dragon? Like the chief?" he asked finally, his voice sounding a bit higher than normal. Perhaps I shouldn't have told him about that one.

I nodded, squeezing the edges of the blanket in my fists.

He returned my half-smile. "Well, I guess it'll be easier for us to get you out of here." Inside, I breathed a sigh of reliefâ€"so he had come to rescue me.

"Us?" Fallon asked, perking up again.

"Yeah," Jet said, glancing at Fallon before returning his gaze to me, "Brad and I came together."

Words spewed from my mouth before my brain could stop them. "You and Brad are working together? Both of you?"

Jet smirked, glaring at me a bit. "He was the only person I could think of who might have an idea of where the tribe wasâ€"because you know Geoff and his family were completely uselessâ€"besides, he also had a car."

"And he knew?" I tightened the blanket around my back. "Where the tribe was?"

Jet scrunched up his nose slightly, tilting his head to one side. "Not exactly."

"So how'd you find us?" Fallon leaned back against the wall the bed was pressed up against.

"Apparently, every time a hunter encounters a shapeshifter they plot

the point on some sort of online map only accessible to hunters. So, using those points, we came up with some possible locations for the tribe," Jet explained, "Thankfully, our second guess was the right one."

I had to admit, I was impressed. The fact that Jet and Brad would work together at all impressed me. Although, come to think of it, it did make sense—"I was the one thing they had in common.

"So Brad is outside the tribe right now with his Charger, ready to make a quick getaway when we need it?" I asked.

Jet nodded. "He's also there if we need any outside help escaping."

"But how will he know if he's needed?" Fallon asked, butting in again, "You have no way of communicating with him. And I'm almost positive the chief won't let you out of the tribe until you decide to leave for good—if he even keeps that promise." Fallon's voice dropped to a bitter whisper that only I could hear at her last statement.

Jet's answer was to pull a small skin-toned, pebble looking thing from his ear. "It's a comms unit, from Brad's family's hunting supplies," he said, "It has a ten mile radius, so we can talk even while I'm in the tribe and he's circling around it almost ten miles out."

Fallon took the device—that couldn't have been bigger than my fingernail—out of Jet's hand. She looked impressed, but, of course, she didn't say so.

But I wasn't thinking about how impressive the small communication device was. I was thinking about the person on the other end. "So, Brad's been listening to our entire conversation?"

"Yeah," Jet said, "That little thing can pick up a lot."

So he heard my explanation of being able to turn into any animal. I had kind of wanted to tell him that little bit of information in person. I wanted to be able to see and gauge his reaction. One of the main reasons hunters hunted shapeshifters was because they thought we were more animal than human. Wouldn't I be proving their theory to be correct by being any and every animal?

"Oh," was my brilliant response as Jet took back the device from Fallon and stuck it in his ear. "Uhh, hi Brad."

Jet wasn't smiling when he turned to me and told me that Brad said hi back. The look on his face made me wonder what else Brad had said that Jet chose not to repeat. I could tell that—whatever it was—it wasn't something that I wouldn't have liked but rather something Jet didn't like.

Jet shoved his hands in the pockets of his pants, looking around the room before returning his gaze to me. "We're here to get you out, Mar. So, whenever you want to leave, we'll be ready."

Standing up, and placing her hands on her hips in the perfect imitation of her evil twin, Fallon snapped, "And how exactly do you

plan on doing that?"

Jet raised his eyebrows. "We'll just sneak her out at night when everyone's asleep."

"And what about the guards? Or maybe that giant wall you walked through on your way in here? I mean, you had to have seen that. You did come to the tribe in the middle of daylight." Fallon raised one hand above her head to emphasize the size of the wall surrounding the tribe.

"Fallon, relax," I shot back before she could embarrass Jet any further, "Escaping at night had been our first thought too, remember?"

Fallon scowled but didn't say anything.

"I've been thinking about it," I started, "I think the best time to escape would be very early in the morning."

"Why's that?" Jet asked.

I glanced over at Fallon who emitted a small grunt to indicate she was listening. "The guards change shifts at 6am," I said, "If we leave around five, then the guards on the twelve to six shift will be exhausted and more likely to miss us."

"Or more likely to fall for our tricks," Fallon added.

Jet shrugged. "Sounds like a good idea to me." His eyes shifted to the right as if he was trying to see his own ear. "Brad agrees," he sighed, looking back to me and Fallon.

Fallon plopped back down on the bed. "Great," she said, fake enthusiasm snaking from her lips, "we're all in favor."

I moved my left hand up my other arm to grip my elbow. "There's one other thing. We have to get my dad out too."

"You found your father?" Jet asked.

I nodded. "He's being held captive in a cottage behind the chief's house."

The edges of Jet's mouth turned down slightly. "Well, that complicates things a bit."

From the bed, Fallon rolled her eyes. "We broke in there once before, I think we can do it again. I graciously volunteer to lead the guards away and then you two can figure out how to get her dad out."

"But, Fallon, what if they added more guards since last time?" I asked, "We haven't been back since you were caught."

She shrugged, clearly unfazed by the possibility of more guards. "So I'll stake it out during the day first. No big deal."

I shook my head. "I don't think you should go near the chief's house until we're absolutely sure we need the distraction. They might get suspicious. Jet would be more likely to get by unnoticed."

"More than me? I'm practically invisible!"

"Yeah, and if I get caught, I can just say I got lost while looking for the chief," Jet added, ignoring Fallon's comment.

"Fine," Fallon pouted.

"We still need to find a way to get the gate open," I said, trying to remember how it had opened for me when I first arrived.

"Actually," Fallon said, her voice slick with slyness, "I don't think we have to."

"And why's that, oh wise one?" I asked, initiating a bit of payback for all the times she made fun of me for being the one in the prophecy.

"Well, you see my queen," she startedâ€"clearly my attempt failedâ€"smiling at me, "Earlier today, while I was being invisible, I found a section in the wall that is loose. With at least two of us putting weight on it, I'm sure it'll budge enough to sneak through."

"Does anyone else know about this section?" Jet asked.

"Nah," Fallon said, "People rarely walk down that way." She laughed. "People don't go down alleys in general, nevermind the alley behind an empty house in the least desirable area to live."

"Did anyone see you?"

Fallon shook her head. "I was completely alone when I found it. That girl, Drew, saw me leaving the alley but you can't really find the spot unless you're looking for it."

"Okay." Jet nodded. "It sounds like a good plan. I'll count the guards around your father's prison andâ€"

"â€"And then we make a run for it the next morning," I said, finishing Jet's sentence. We were going to make it outâ€"I was determined to leave the tribe behind me.

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The next day, I woke up earlier than normal. Usually, when there's something exciting such as the first day of school, or even going on vacation, happening the next day, people find it hard to sleep the night before. I had a hard time sleeping last nightâ€"I couldn't even imagine what I would be like that night.

My mind wouldn't seem to settle down, no matter how hard I tried to think soothing thoughts. Instead, the thoughts swirling in my head consisted of Jet, Brad, getting my dad out of prison, how the chief would react if we were caught, how Yvette would react if we were caught, what Taz would think, Jet's grandmother, my new shifting abilities, and of course whether or not we'd actually all make it out. Needless to say, there was a lot on my mind.

During training, I didn't have to pretend to fail at shifting. There

were so many other things on my mind that I couldn't have focused enough to properly shift if my life depended on it. I didn't even manage to change the color of my coat. I spent the whole afternoon shifting back and forth between human and wolf form. My trainer didn't even comment. He just watched, losing hope in time with his worsening posture.

When Taz walked in, my trainer told me to take a ten minute break. I had a feeling he didn't want Taz seeing meâ€”and thereby himâ€”fail, again.

"Hey," I said casually as I grabbed a cup of water and stood beside Taz.

His eyes narrowed, studying me. "Why aren't you trying?"

I coughed a bit, almost choking on my water. "What are you talking about?" I asked as innocently as I could.

"You know I've been watching you," he commented, "When you're trying to shift into another animal you have this look of complete concentration on your face. But then, when you have your body actually shift, you lose that look of concentrationâ€”as if you are resigning yourself to your wolf form."

I faked a shrug and focused on my water. "I am trying."

"I think you're lying," he said, his eyes still on me. Was I really that terrible of a liar that everyone knew when I wasn't telling the truth? When Taz spoke again, his voice was gentler, less accusing. "What's really going on, Marina? You know you can trust me."

"Can I?" I shot, my gaze snapping up to meet his. He seemed surprised by my reaction. It probably wasn't been the best way to convince him of my innocence. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, finishing the water in my cup, and threw it in the trash. Turning back to Taz, I sighed. "I have to get back to training."

He nodded, not responding to my outburst and allowing me to walk away without answering his questions. He was definitely suspicious, but, whether or not he would act on his suspicions seemed up in the air. I hoped he would choose to forget about themâ€”at least until tomorrow morning. I knew Taz was my friend, but, how good of a friend, I wasn't sure.

//*/*

I was as pleasant as ever at dinnerâ€”actually, more pleasant than I've ever been. Taz didn't say a word when I sat down at a table with his family as usual. I made small talk with the chief, and even did my best not to cringe whenever Yvette spoke. I acted as I would have acted had they not kidnapped me and kept me as a prisoner. Every time I smiled at them I thought about the looks on their faces when they discovered I was gone tomorrow morning. Just picturing their surprise and outrage made me grin.

Nobody mentioned Jetâ€”not that I really expected them to. I was sure the chief had ordered the guards to keep Jet and I from seeing each other not matter what. That had probably been the reason for my extra guard today.

Later that night, I wanted nothing more than to go see Jet againâ€”just to make sure we were all set for the morning and to make sure Brad was clear on where he had to meet usâ€”okay, so maybe that wasn't completely true. Of course I wanted everything to go smoothly tomorrow, but I really wanted to see Jet just for the sake of seeing him. Until he appeared in the tribe yesterday, I hadn't realized how much I missed him.

But I couldn't risk sneaking out that night. I could wait a few hours.

I settled into bed, thinking of how I would get to see Jet again tomorrow. The thought slowed my racing heartâ€”until I remembered that I would get to see Brad tomorrow as well. It wasn't that I didn't want to see Bradâ€”oh no, I was actually excited to see himâ€”but, having the two of them together, along with my dad, was going to get very awkward very quickly. My dad didn't even know that Brad knew Jet and I were shapeshifters, and he most certainly didn't know Brad was one of the hunters who attacked last fall.

I foresaw a lot of explaining and scolding in my near future.

Surprisingly, I managed to fall asleep rather quickly that night. I guess the lack of sleep from the night before sent me over the edge into oblivion.

Oblivion did not last long.

I awoke in the middle of the night to a blaring alarm, and, thinking the house was on fire (I mean, come one, what other kind of alarm would go off at two o'clock in the morning?), I bolted out of bed. Realizing that there was no extreme source of heat in the house, I glanced out my window to see people, in their coats and snow boots, racing down their front steps and heading for the main square.

What was going on?

Whatever it was, my gut told me I wasn't going to like it.

I pulled my own bootsâ€”or, rather, Taz's sister's bootsâ€”on my feet, grabbed a jacket and raced outside. I immediately realized something was up: the guards usually stationed outside my cabin had mysteriously disappeared. Had they caught someone breaking curfew again? But an alarm hadn't gone off when they caught Fallon. Something wasn't right.

There was already a crowd forming in the main square when I approached. I spotted Fallon's orange head despite the dim lighting and pushed my way over to her.

"Fallon?" I half-shouted, wincing at the sound of the still screeching alarm, "What's going on?"

"I don't know!" she yelled back.

If Fallon didn't know then it must be something really big. I had always assumed Fallon knew everything about the tribe.

We huddled together, eyes scanning the crowd for the chief or anything that seemed out of place. I noticed a number of guards to my left, making their way towards the center of the square.

"There," I said, pointing to the clump of guards ushering people back so they could get through. Just like when Jet arrived yesterday (or technically two days ago, I suppose), the crowd that had gathered fell silent when the chief stepped up onto a small wooden platform. I wondered if he ever made "state of the tribe" addresses from that platform.

When Yvette followed suit, dragging with her a struggling Drew, I shot a nervous glance at Fallon. This couldn't be good.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the chief boasted, "I apologize for waking you at this hour of the night, but I'm afraid we had someone break curfew."

I frownedâ€"that still didn't explain the alarm. And, judging from Fallon's confused expression, I could tell she was thinking the same thing.

That was when Yvette stepped forward, still firmly holding onto Drew's upper arm. "This girl was found in the alley behind the old Grennon cabin. The alarm sounded because she was attempting to break through a loose section of the wall and run away. As a consequence of her actions, she will spend the next two weeks in isolation. Thanks to Drew, hereâ€"and in case anyone else had any ideasâ€"the alarm will no longer be active only during curfew. It will be on constantly. And just as a reminder, if you wish to go outside the walls you must put in a request with the council and, of course, exit only through the main gates."

Yvette took a small step back once more as he husband cleared his throat. "So, umm," the chief said awkwardly, glancing around at all the half-asleep and most likely annoyed faces, "once again, I apologize for waking everyone up. I hope you have a good rest of your night."

"This is your one and only warning," Yvette added. Despite the number of people surrounding me, I was sure _I _was the one she was glaring at when she said it.

I turned my back to Yvette, leaning towards Fallon's ear. "So," I gulped, "do we have a plan b?"

11. On the Run

****Thank you everyone for your wonderful reviews! They always make my day, and to all my U.S. readers, happy Fourth of July! Yay for fireworks and independence :P****

The first part of Plan B wasn't any different from our initial plan. We still had to get my dad out and Fallon still had to distract the guards who were positioned outside the basement prison. Thankfully, when Jet staked out the place the other day he reported that there were only two guards standing guard. Despite the bad news that Drew had stolen our escape route (and had gotten caught doing so), Jet told Fallon the next morning that he had even located the keys to my

dad's prison on one of the guards. It was my job to grab them.

I just hoped that we were actually able to successfully execute this plan.

I tried not to think about what would happen if we got caught. Aside from the few choice words she had for Yvette and the chief that night, no one had seen or heard of Drew since Yvette had carted her away. Part of me felt bad for Drew. Like me, all she wanted was to escape the tribe that wrongfully imprisoned her. If we had more time, I would have considered finding her and helping her break out too, but, with Yvette's warning echoing in our heads, we agreed that the sooner we left the better.

Checking the time, I opened my window and stuck my head out into the chilly morning air. The temperature had definitely increased a bit over the past two daysâ€"it was still pretty cold outâ€"but it rose just enough to melt most of the remaining snow. That meant that, if we were successful, we would be less likely to leave footprints for anyone from the tribe to follow. Of course, there was always the fact that they could track my scent, but, hopefully, once Jet and I made it to Brad it wouldn't matter whether or not they found my scent.

It was still dark outâ€"at four-thirty in the morning the sun had yet to rise. I had gotten out of bed an hour ago, figuring at that point an hour of sleep (if I miraculously managed to fall asleep during that hour) wouldn't help me any more than no sleep. I had gone over the plan in my head at least a dozen times as well as practiced shifting into various small animals.

I knew I wasn't just prepared, but also readyâ€"and yet, I couldn't help feeling nervous. I still hadn't perfected my flying. If our plan did work and we made it home, I would have to ask Skye for pointers. Flying was the one part of being a shapeshifter that didn't come naturally to meâ€"well, that and possibly breathing fire when in dragon formâ€"I had yet to try that and, truthfully, wasn't too eager to start. While being able to shift into any animal was fun and exciting, having that amount of power also scared me.

But I couldn't worry about that now. Fallon and Jet would be waiting for me.

I shifted into a black cat, jumped up onto my open windowsill and down into the dirt below. Keeping to the shadows, I managed to make it to our meeting spot, just outside the main square. Fallon and Jet were already there, Jet still in human formâ€"but, then again, him being a wolf wasn't exactly part of the plan. I, on the other hand, had to be able to shift between multiple animals.

"You ready?" Fallon asked, holding out her hand for me. I nodded my cat head, something that I was sure looked odd. Concentrating on the small bird form I was supposed to be morphing into, I shifted from the black cat to a wrenâ€"a smaller bird typically with brownish coloring and a beak longer than a sparrow. Fallon had thought it would be the best type of bird for what I needed to do, and still be small enough to hide in her pocket.

Spreading my wings, I stumbled a bit as I hopped into the air, fumbling to flap my wings just enough to settle in Fallon's palm. I saw her purse her lips in amusement but thankfully she didn't say

anything. She knew I wasn't the best flyer.

She carefully helped me into her jacket pocket, then she and Jet snuck off towards the cottage behind the chief's house. We came around the back of the cottage, being sure to stay hidden in the shrubbery that lined that section of the wall.

"Okay, remember," Fallon whispered to Jet, "Don't come out until you hear me say 'you'll never catch me.'"

"I know," Jet said, rather irritably. I smiled to myself. Clearly Jet wasn't too fond of Fallon, but, then again, Fallon did tend to push a lot of people's buttons, mine included.

Leaving Jet crouched behind the bushes, she tiptoed around the side of the house to the front door. Not bothering to be quiet anymore, she turned the doorknob and walked right in as if she owned the place. She let her footsteps echo across the floor as she made her way over to the basement door.

Fallon held the door open for a few seconds, both of us listening. Thenâ€¦ "Hell-ohh?" Fallon called down the steps, smiling when we heard the grunting and shuffling of the guards below. She quickly closed the door, pushing back against it as the footsteps of the guards thundered up the stairs towards us.

When the door didn't immediately give under their light pressure, one of the guards yelled, "Who's there? You're not supposed to be here."

I did my best to fly out of Fallon's pocket, landing on the counter nearby as she backed away from the door. A second later, the two guards came barreling into the room, no doubt expecting the force holding them in the basement to still be against the door.

"You again!" One shouted spotting Fallon, "Did you not learn your lesson last time?"

Fallon crossed her arms over her chest as I crept towards the belt loop of the second guard. "What lesson?" she asked, sugar pouring from her upturned lips.

"This area is off limits," the second guard told her, "_And_, you're out after curfew."

Fallon frowned, glancing quickly at me before returning her gaze to the guardsâ€¦ they could have mistaken her eye movement for a fleeting look at her watch. "Technically, I'm out _before_ curfew's been lifted."

I flapped my wings, desperately trying to keep myself airborne while also not attracting the attention of either guard, especially that of the second seeing as I was hovering right next to his right hip.

"Doesn't matter," the first said, "Either way you are breaking the rules."

Sticking my head forward, I grabbed the set of keys with my beak, gently lifting them off the chain on the guard's belt.

"You're coming with us," the second guard said, stepping towards Fallon. I silently breathed a sigh of relief and pumped my wings harder—the keys were heavier than I anticipated—but, then again, I was only a three inch bird.

Fallon smiled, seeing I had the keys, and turned towards the exit. "You'll have to catch me first." She then darted outside and the guards ran after her. I sunk to the floor under the weight of the keys.

From outside, I heard Fallon sing, "You'll never catch me!" Pounding footsteps then—silence.

I shifted into human form and picked up the set of keys, glad to have fingers and opposable thumbs again. The front door of the cottage creaked a bit and I looked up to see Jet sneaking inside. Under normal circumstances, I would have blushed and attempted to cover myself in his presence, but, since nothing about breaking out of a place that was more of a prison than a happy community could be considered normal, I tried not to care.

"This way," I said, slipping down the stairs, Jet following behind. At the bottom, I turned and walked to the small opening in my dad's cell door.

"Marina?" he asked, already standing at the door, "What are you doing here?"

I smiled at him. "We're getting out. And you're coming too."

"Marina, you shouldn't have worried about me," he said, "Just go. Go now before the guards return."

I raised my eyebrows at him, smiling wider. "Then what was the point of getting this key?" I raised it for him to see before inserting it into the hole next to the doorknob. A click later and the door swung open. My dad stepped out, smiling too now. "Besides, they shouldn't be back for awhile—hopefully."

"John?" my dad asked, noticing Jet for the first time, "What are you doing here?"

"Later," I said before Jet could speak, "Fallon bought us some time, but eventually the guards will be back. We don't want to be here when that happens."

"Hold on," my dad said, glancing over to another cell door, "There's someone else down here."

I walked over to the other door and peeked in the opening. Staring up at me from the stone floor was a lynx. "I'll get you out," I said to the cat. But, before I could turn to the keyhole, the lynx in the cell shifted to reveal Drew in its place.

"Don't," she snapped.

I frowned at her. "We're going to escape. I thought that's what you wanted?"

"Of course I do, but, like I told you before, _I don't need your help_, " she snarled, "I've been on my own my whole life. I can get myself out of this hell hole."

I stared at her for a moment, completely shocked. Did she really distrust people that much that she won't even let me unlock her cell door for her?

She sat back down on the cold floor and looked up at me. "I thought you didn't have a lot of time."

Without another look back, I turned, shifting into the black cat again, and raced up the steps after Jet and my dad. Once outside, the three of us stuck to the shadows as much as possible. Because of my current favorable size and color, I was the one who peeked around each corner and gaze the "all clear." We made our way towards the South entrance, not coming across quite as many guards as I expectedâ€"hopefully that meant Fallon was proving to be more of a handle than her two guards anticipated and there wasn't someone else creating trouble at this time in the morning. We couldn't afford to have another plan stolen.

My dad and Jet crouched by the wall of the main training center while I snuck around to see if Brad had already executed his part of the plan.

I immediately noticed that the main gate was open. That meant they had heard Brad's distraction.

If there weren't still five guards standing by the gate I would have signaled to make a break for it then and there, but we couldn't risk being seen. We didn't want anyone coming after us before we had made it safely to Brad's car and were on our way home.

I watched as one guard cocked his head to the left: listening. He then beckoned for two guards to follow him outside and around the other side of the wall. I couldn't help but smile at how well things were working so far. We still had to escape.

Sneaking back to my dad and Jet, I shifted into human form once more. "Tell Brad that he needs to amp it up. There are still two guards at the gate."

Jet nodded.

Initially I had doubted Brad's idea for using walkie-talkies stashed in various trees of brush to draw the attention of the guards. But he had insisted that by strategically placing one every hundred feet or so, and turning each to a different channel, that they could give the illusion of someone walking around the edge of the wall. And, depending what the guards heard out of the walkie-talkies depended on quickly they reacted to the possible threat. Brad was supposed to simply talk like he was on an actual hunting trip, but if all the guards didn't respond after that, then he was supposed to actually set off a few gun shots. We were sure that the guards would go running if they heard the sound of guns.

I peeked around the corner and saw the two guards exchange nervous glances before one disappeared into the trees beyond the gate. Only

one guard remained. I supposed we could manage to sneak by him, but it wasn't ideal.

But then the last guard did something none of us had expected—he pressed the button to close the gate. My eyes widened as the giant doors before slowly began to come together.

No, no, no.

"We have to make a break for it now," I said, not bothering to keep my voice down. Without another moment's hesitation we rushed forward. There was still at least a fifteen foot gap between the doors—twelve—ten—seven—four—

"Stop!" the last guard shouted.

We ignored him and kept running. Three—we were going to make it.

"Stop, or I sound the alarm!"

I slowed and turned to see the guard still standing beside the controls for the gate, but this time, his hand was hovering over a different button—which, just so happened to be a big, red button—figures. In front of me the doors to the gate sealed shut.

My heart sank. We were so close.

"Hold your arms out and walk back over here," the guard said, rather smugly, "And no shifting."

Slowly, we obliged. In the light the guard was finally able to make out our faces. If he was surprised he didn't show it.

"Well, well, well," he said, glancing between each of us, "What do we have here? A criminal, a _savior_," the way he said "savior" made me want to throw up, "and a—"

Thunk!

The guard's head smashed into the controls—conveniently reopening the gate for us—and his body crumpled to the ground.

"Gloating is not very attractive you know—especially on you." Fallon ran her fingers over the tops of her knuckles as she smiled down at the unconscious guard.

"Fallon?" I asked incredulously. My body couldn't seem to express the level of surprise and gratefulness at seeing my friend standing before me. "But what happened to the guards chasing you?"

"Like I told you, I know how to make myself invisible," she said pulling a piece of cloth from behind her back, "I thought you might want this."

Taking the dress from her, I pulled it over my head. It did little to ease the cold but it was a nice cover. I grabbed her, pulling her into a hug and breaking out into a smile myself. "Thank you," I whispered in her ear and then let go, "for everything. I'm really

going to miss you."

Fallon smiled again, showing her teeth. "Are you crazy?" she demanded. She gestured to the small backpack hanging off her shoulders. "I'm coming with you!"

I just continued smiling as we made a break for the gate and slipped into the partially snowy woods. We probably ran for about a mile, doing our best not to make a distinguishable path through the trees. We didn't suspect we were being followed, but we also didn't want to take the chance.

"Hold up," Jet said suddenly, tilting his head. We slowed to a stop, all quiet, listening for something other than the stirring of animals—"well, normal animals.

Then we heard it.

It was soft, almost unnoticeable in the silent trees, but it was recognizable—"the pounding of numerous paws on soil.

"They're coming," Fallon whispered—"the fear in her voice uncharacteristic. It was only then that I realized she was just as desperate as I was to escape the tribe, if not more.

"This way," Jet said, cutting to the right. Then to Brad, he said, "We're heading west a bit. Meet us further down the road."

We ran faster now that we knew we were being pursued. But our speed didn't seem to matter. In human form we were slower than the guards, and it soon became clear that no matter how fast we ran, they would eventually catch us.

We slowed, ducking behind a set of three large pine trees, as the paws go louder in our ears like some sort of impending doom.

"We could hide," Fallon suggested, glancing around the area.

Jet and I both shook our heads.

"They would sniff us out," my dad said.

"Then what do we do?"

We all exchanged looks. I was at a loss—"there was nothing we could do.

Looking around at each of us, my dad spoke carefully, "You three continue heading west. I'll go back east and lead them away."

"No!" I said immediately. He wasn't going to leave us. I wasn't going to lose my dad again.

My dad smiled sadly at me. "Marina, sweetie," he said softly, "It's the only chance you have. I told you you needed to escape. I'm grateful you got me out too, but all I ever wanted was for you to be safe."

"But—" "

He kissed the top of my head and the words died in my throat. "Go home," he whispered, "Tell everyone I'm okay and that...I'll come when I can."

Tears lined the crevices of my eyes as he took me in his arms, hugging me tight. I nodded when he pulled away.

"Go," he said a bit more urgently.

Jet took the lead, weaving our way through the trees as my dad headed in the opposite direction. Part of me secretly hoped that my dad's idea didn't workâ€"I didn't want to leave him behindâ€"but I knew that he was right. I couldn't stay in the tribe, and, if they caught me now I would most likely never get the chance to leave again.

The sound of paws behind us grew distant the further and further we went. After about half an hour we slowed, no longer able to hear anyone following us. By now the sun had risenâ€"no doubt people in the tribe would be beginning to wake up, if they hadn't alreadyâ€"and that meant we had less than an hour before they realized we (well, I) were gone and sent a search party after us. Ten to fifteen minutes later, Jet stopped completely, his head swiveling to survey the area.

"Do you even know where you're going?" Fallon asked, leaning against a nearby tree as if it was the only thing keeping her upright.

"Of course," said Jet, his eyes settling on slightly to his left as if he was mentally plotting the path ahead of him, "We have to head downhill more. Come on, it's not much further."

I instinctively sniffed the air but couldn't pick anything up. Had I been in wolf form I would have no doubt been able to pick up Brad's scent.

We continued walking. The air had begun to warm up, however slightly, thanks to the sun but the ground was still frozen and I couldn't feel my feet. It really wasn't long before I spotted a gap in the treesâ€"a gap filled by something large and blackâ€"Brad's car.

We stepped out into the clearing, which, I quickly realized existed because someone had made a dirt road. But the road wasn't the first thing I noticed. No, that was Brad.

He looked exactly as he had the day he "kidnapped" me from the adoption agency and taken me for a ride on his jet-ski. His arms were crossed, revealing the toned in his chest and forearms, and he was leaning against the hood of his Charger. His crystalline, blue eyes had honed in on me, staring at me so intently that I couldn't help but squirm on the inside.

Smiling sheepishly at him, I said, "Hey."

Brad didn't respond. I suddenly found myself enveloped in his arms.

"Are you okay?" he asked as I hugged him back, "They didn't hurt you, did they?"

Pulling back, I shook my head. "No, I'm fine."

A noise to my left diverted my attention.

"We should get going," Jet said.

Brad drove and Jet got in on the passenger side while Fallon and I slid in the back. Once we were buckled, Fallon leaned over to me and whispered in my ear, "I understand now," her eyes finding Brad up front, "About not being able to choose. _He_ _is hot_."

I bit my lip glancing between the two boys in the front. I knew I couldn't lead them both on for much longer—I had to choose soon. But I didn't want to worry about that now. In fact, I didn't want to worry about anything at all.

Turning my head to look behind me, I smiled. We did it. I was finally free of the tribe.

So I promised a couple chapters back that I would announce which characters would be making appearances in this next group. I would like to thank **_CelticH2O**_** for the submission of Kiara Benson and **_**paigerz54**_** for Kye Russel. I'm thinking both these characters will first appear in chapter 13 and then play bigger roles in chapters 15, 16, and 17. As before, I hope that I can accurately portray the characters you designed. If there is any aspect of the character you would really like me to include in the story, feel free to message me and I'll do my best to put it in.**

**Also, if anyone was wondering, this story is going to be much longer than the previous two. I already have more than thirty chapters planned out (including the ones posted), and there's still a bunch of things I want to make happen before I figure out the ending. At the moment, I'm thinking this story will be around forty-five chapters, maybe even fifty, so there's still a long way to go.
**

Thanks again for the submissions and I hope everyone will continue to stick it out with Marina! :)

12. Schematics

All of my reviewers (and readers) are awesome. So thank you for being awesome! If you haven't reviewed, please do! I would love to know what you think. Here's the next chapter: I hope you like it :)

What amazed me most was that Jet and Brad had survived the trip to the tribe without trying to kill each other. During the ride out of the mountains, I watched the two of them. At first they both seemed tense, their backs stiff against the seats, but then I noticed them relax once we drove out of the trees and made it to paved road. I would have thought they'd remain tense being in such close proximity to one another. Flashbacks to the fight between them last fall, where they both ended up a bloody mess, had me anticipating a flying fist every few minutes.

But one never came.

In fact, they almost seemed comfortable with each other. When Brad

turned on the radio, Jet started tapping his fingers on his knee. And, when the song changed, Jet politely asked Brad if he could change it. To which Brad pleasantly responded, saying that he didn't like the current song either. It made me wonder what the trip there had been like, because, now that I was out of the confines of the tribe and had found out we were in Utahâ€”somewhere in the mountains near Salt Lake Cityâ€”I realized that that had to be a very long drive.

Fallon didn't really talk. Her eyes were glued to the scenery passing us by. I couldn't imagine what it was like for her to see how the rest of the world lived. The only time her eyes left the window was when they found Brad's in the rearview mirrorâ€”but I was pretty sure Brad had no idea she was looking. If I didn't know any better I'd have thought that Fallon was developing a crush on Brad, either that, or she just really appreciated his good looksâ€”which, of course, I couldn't exactly blame her for.

We drove for four hours in near silence. Fallon was the first to address everyone, which wasn't so surprising given how outspoken she could be. "So," she started, eyes moving from person to person, "Are we going to stop at some point? Because I don't know about the rest of you, but the human here would like some breakfast and possibly a toilet too."

In the front, Brad frowned, glancing back at Fallon in the mirror. "I'm human too, you know."

"Obviously, since the only thing you seem to be useful for is driving." Fallon scoffed, looking back out the window. Err, maybe her taking to Brad hadn't surpassed his appearance.

By now the road was flooded with other cars, most people on their way to work. Brad's hands tightened around the wheel, not caused by any of the other drivers, but, no doubt, by Fallon's comment.

"Why is she here again?" Brad asked, speaking through his teeth.

Neither Jet nor I answered him as Fallon huffed at the window.

"Umm, Brad?" I asked, "Maybe Fallon's right. We have a long drive ahead of us. We should stop while most people are on the road."

Brad's grip loosened at my words. "Yeah," he sighed, "Yeah, alright."

We got off the highway at the next exit, pulling into the parking lot of an IHOP. Getting out of the car, I was again met with a rush of cold air, chilling my bare feet once more. Glancing between the restaurant and my feet, I realized that having no shoes was going to be a problem. In fact, my dress probably wasn't going to be acceptable either. Since Jet hadn't shifted at all when we escaped, he was still fully clothedâ€”his attire was perfectly acceptable. Mine was not.

As if he read my mind, Jet said, "I have some extra clothes in the trunk, Marina." He moved around to the back of the car. "They'll be big on you. I didn't think to grab any of your own clothes before we

left. But, the staff in there shouldn't refuse to seat you."

I nodded as he opened a duffel bag, handing me a blue flannel shirt, a pair of jeans and hiking boots. Holding the jeans up to my pale, and goose-bump ridden, legs, I said, "Uhh, I think I'll stick with the dress for bottoms." I gave him back the jeans and pulled the flannel shirt on over top of the dress Fallon had given me. I buttoned it up, covering the dirt and holes. Glancing down, I realized that the shirt was much too long—"almost the length of the dress. I grabbed the front ends of the shirt and tied them together in a knot so it rested just below my belly button. I then pulled on the boots and tied them as tight as they would go. My feet would still move around in them but at least they wouldn't fall off my feet when I walked.

"Are you ready yet?" Fallon asked, staring at the IHOP like it was the entrance to heaven. She was definitely much more excited about actually going inside the restaurant and observing everyone than the promise of food and a bathroom that the building guaranteed.

"Yeah."

She turned, looking me up and down. "You look ridiculous," she commented.

I glared at her. "You would look ridiculous too if you were wearing a guy's shirt and boots that are probably four sizes too big."

She smiled but didn't say anything, leading the way. Brad, Jet and I followed her inside, grateful to once again get out of the cold.

Smiling widely at us, while also judging my attire, the hostess asked, "How many?"

"How many what?" Fallon asked, giving the woman a funny look.

I put a hand over my mouth, stifling a giggle, while a smile tugged at Jet's lips. Brad stepped forward and placed a hand on Fallon's shoulder pulling her back a bit. She shot him a slightly baffled but clearly annoyed look that seemed to demand what she had done wrong.

"Four," Brad told the hostess firmly. She smiled at him and picked up four menus.

"This way." She led us around the other side of the glass to the dining room. She gestured to a table and said, "Enjoy your meal." Her eyes lingered on Brad, and then on Jet, adding, "If you need anything, feel free to call me—"I mean call me over to your table." She quickly left then, her cheeks furiously blushing red. It seemed that she—"like the rest of the world"—found both Jet and Brad extremely good looking.

I sat down and Fallon took one of the seats next to me. I noticed Brad and Jet exchange a look, before Jet jerked his head towards the remaining seat next to me and Brad sat down, Jet settling in the seat across from me. Doing my best to ignore the secret exchange, I passed Fallon a menu and told her, "You pick something from here that you

want." She nodded, taking the menu from me and opening it.

A waiter soon came to take our drink order.

It was weird. We were all acting like everything was perfectly normalâ€"well, except for Fallon since she'd never been to a restaurant before. But, we were acting like we hadn't just run from a power-hungry dragon shapeshifter and his psycho wife, like we hadn't just broken out of what could possibly be the most cleverly disguised prison in existence. We were acting as if we weren't two shapeshifters (one with a destiny she still can't fathom), a shapeshifter hunter who, for reasons still unknown, can see the auras of supernaturals, and a girl who is surprisingly human despite coming from a long line of shapeshifters and was labeled an outcast by her own friends and family. I hadn't felt normal in so long that, sitting at that table then and acting like I was, feltâ€"weird.

Once the waiter returned with our drinks and wrote down what we wanted to eat, Brad leaned forward and said, "So, where to?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?" I asked, taking a sip of my juice, "Home, of course. Where else would we go?"

Brad threw his gaze to Jet, who laid his elbows against the edge of the table, looking across it to me.

I was once again struck by how well Brad and Jet seemed to get along, even know each other. Had I not had to choose one to love as more than a friend, I would have been happy to see their continued cooperation, but, at that moment, it didn't bring me any comfort for I knew that once I chose, thatâ€"friendship would be cut off.

"I found the note in your room," Jet said, "The one with my mother's old address on it and the information about the restraining order on the guy Nathan Richter?"

Oh, of course. I had almost forgotten about how I had Cole get me into the police records. With everything that had happened, what with Valerie running away, the chief arriving in California, the prophecy, and the battle that ensued between shapeshifters and hunters, I had completely forgotten about the information I had found on Jet's real mother, Deirdre. I nodded to Jet, telling him that I remembered.

"The restraining order on him was filed only a couple months before I was born," he said, "and we both know that the adoption agency said I was left on the doorstep by a German Sheppard."

"Yeah?" I asked, "How are they relevant?"

"I think that this Nathan Richter guy might have been a hunter," Jet explained.

"A hunter?" I asked, glancing over to Brad, "As in a shapeshifter hunter?"

Jet nodded. "If my mom knew she was being hunted, then wouldn't it be easierâ€"saferâ€"for her to leave me at an adoption agency and draw the hunter after her? Wouldn't that explain why she was in her animal form when she left me? So that she could make a quick getaway?"

I thought about it. There were parts of his theory that made sense, but it was all speculation. "But then why wouldn't she come back for you once she escaped the hunter? How do you even know this Nathan Richter guy was a hunter?"

Brad spoke up. "We don't," he said, "But it's entirely possible that he was. Usually, when a hunter pursues a target alone, he uses an alias."

Jet's voice was softer when he spoke again. "And, she couldn't have come back for meâ€¦if she was caught."

Caught? Oh god, I hadn't even considered that.

"There is a facility in Arizona, north of Flagstaff," Brad said, "where hunters sometimes take shapeshifters."

"Like a prison?" I asked.

Brad was hesitant to answer. He grimaced and I knew his answer was going to be less than truthful. "Sortâ€¦of," he admitted finally, then continued, "It's not often that a hunter is asked to take a shapeshifter thereâ€¦although there have been more requests to capture rather than kill recentlyâ€¦but it's highly likely that if this guy hunted alone then he would have taken Jet's mother to this facility."

"If it's alright," Jet said, "I would like to go there, causeâ€¦I know it's a long shotâ€¦but there's a possibility that she might still be there."

Both Jet and Brad were looking at me as if the decision to go rested entirely on my shoulders. Why was it up to me? I looked sideways at Fallon to see what she thought.

She shrugged. "I'm up for another rescue mission."

I turned back to Jet and smiled. I knew how much this meant to him. "Yeah, okay. If there's a chance then we have to try, right?"

For the rest of breakfast, Brad told us as much as he could about this "facility" that held shapeshiftersâ€¦well, as much as he could without drawing suspicion or strange looks from nearby tables. I was pretty sure that the woman sitting at the table next to us thought we were a bunch of sadists.

We soon left to get back on the road, now only having a five hour drive until we reached our destination. Brad promised to show us blueprints of the facility when we stopped for the night. In the meantime, we needed to think of a way to get into a place that imprisoned, and most likely tortured, shapeshifters without revealing ourselves to be shapeshifters, and then possibly even break one shapeshifter out of the facility. I didn't necessarily like being a glass half empty type of girl but, the odds of getting in, let alone making it out, weren't exactly in our favor.

//*

Hours later we pulled into the parking lot of a motel. It didn't look

like the nicest place to stay but we needed someplace where we wouldn't be noticed, or, at least, where nobody would ask questions.

Once inside the small room, Brad set a large black bag on the table, pulling the zipper to reveal its contents. There were many things that caught my eye: the two rifles, shotgun, crossbow, and grenade, just to name a few. But Brad ignored all the weapons, pulling from an inside pocket, a severely creased piece of paper. He unfolded it and smoothed it over the table.

"This is the entrance here," he said, pointing to a spot on the diagram.

"What are these over here?" Jet asked, his finger on a row of small, square-shaped rooms, "They look likeâ€"

"They are," Brad said, cutting Jet off, "Those are cells for the prisoners."

"Do we know how to get inside them?" Jet's eyes scanned the rest of the diagram.

"Umm, how about knowing how we get in the building?" Fallon snapped, "Knowing how to get in a cell won't do us any good if we can't get in the prison in the first place."

"She's right," Brad said, sighing, "We need to figure out how to get all of us inside without raising an alarm. This place is heavily guarded, not to mention is equipped with a security system that could rival the White House."

"And we have to get in without the expert shapeshifter hunters realizing you and Marina are shapeshifters," Fallon said.

"That too," said Brad.

I looked up from the blueprints, furrowing my eyebrows as I glanced back and forth between Brad and Jet. "Unlessâ€| I started; maybe there was a way to get in.

"Unless what?" Jet asked.

I smiled at my friends. "Unless we told them we were shapeshifters."

"Marina, you're crazy. You know it would be disastrous if they found out about you guys," Brad said.

"Or maybe," I said, still smirking, "it can work to our advantage."

"How so?"

I laid my hands on the table. "Okay, here's what I'm thinking. What if Brad and Fallon go in pretending to bring Jet in as a prisoner?" I looked to Jet. "You would be in your wolf form, and Brad, you would convince them that Jet is a shapeshifter so they'll take him prisoner. You and Fallon will mention how there was a second shapeshifter that got away, but you intend to go back after it. Then

you two leave. And while in there, Jet, you see if you can find your mother. Then Brad and Fallon will come back a couple hours later, pretending to bring me in as the second shapeshifter, and that is when we will all escape." Finishing my long-winded speech, I took a deep breath in then let it out.

All three of my friends were staring at me, considering my plan. I stared backâ€"I didn't see any of them coming up with a brilliant idea.

Fallon was the first to speak. "It's a good plan," she said.

"And it could work," said Brad, nodding.

I looked expectantly at Jet. I wanted his approval before we went through with my plan. He would be the one subject to the hunters' whims for a few hours. If he wasn't comfortable with that then we would come up with a different plan. I wasn't sure if I would be okay with it.

Jet moved a hand up to rub the back of his neck and then placed it on the table, straightening his arm as much as he could. "Let's do this."

We spent the rest of the night planning details. Jet would have exactly three hours in the facility before Brad, Fallon, and I would be back to get him (and possibly his mother) out. We debated on ways to make sure Jet knew how much time he had. Strapping a watch to his leg was not only out of the question but just plain stupid. Fallon suggested we use the comms unit again but Brad said the guards would sweep Jet with metal detectors and find it. In the end, we decided that Jet would simply have to estimate the time. I didn't like it, sending Jet in blind, but it was the only way our plan was going to work.

Once we had our plan set, and, had gone over it at least ten times, Fallon said she wanted to take a shower before bed. It took only about a minute of being alone with Jet and Brad for the unease to settle in the pit of my stomach, so, leaving them studying the blue prints of the facility, I told them I was heading to the motel lobby to make a phone call and slipped out of the room. For once I was actually grateful my phone had been confiscatedâ€"it gave me an excuse to escape the increasing tension in the room.

There was a payphone outside the entrance to the motel. I inserted the few coins I picked up off the dresser in our room and dialed my home phone number. I hadn't talked to my mom in weeks and she was no doubt out of her mind with worry. Briefly I wondered if she had called the police when she couldn't find me at the airport, or if Jet had told her his suspicions about where I was and his plans to find me. I hoped he had. I didn't like to think about what she had been going through while I was trapped in the tribe.

She picked up on the third ring. "Hello?"

"Mom?" I whispered tentatively.

"Marina?" she exclaimed on the other end, "Oh Marina! Thank god! Are you alright? Where are you? John said something about the tribe but I wasn't sure. I was so worried. Are you okay?"

I smiled, clutching the receiver so hard my knuckles turned white. "Yeah, I'm okay," I told her, "I'm with Jet now."

"Where are you?" she asked again, "Where were you? You're coming home right?"

I assured her that I was coming home, but left out the part regarding exactly when. I had a feeling she wouldn't like the idea of breaking into a specially designed shapeshifter prison. Instead I told her about the tribe, Fallon, Dad, and finally how I'd discovered I could shift into any animal. As with Jet, I was slightly worried about how she would react to the last bit of information, but she took it well.

"I always knew you were special, honey," she said, "It's just coming out for the world to see."

That's what I was afraid of. I still hadn't shown Jet or Brad the prophecy, even though one of the few parts I understood involved Brad. Something else I knew was that it talked of a war—a war I was supposedly going to be in the center of. Up until I successfully turned into an animal other than a wolf or dolphin, there was a small part of me that hoped the prophecy wouldn't come true. But I couldn't deny it anymore.

I said goodbye to my mom, telling her I would see her soon and that I would call again when I could. Fallon was still in the bathroom when I got back, but I didn't mind. I hadn't planned on showering before bed anyway.

It was unfortunate that we only had enough cash to get one room. Both Brad and Jet insisted we save our money as much as possible since we didn't know how long we were going to be on the road, and I didn't argue with them—given the fact that neither Fallon nor I had managed to bring any money with us. I say unfortunate because of the awkward conversation slash confrontation that ensued once we agreed it was time for us to get some sleep.

Had I been able to think straight, I would have slapped both Jet and Brad when they started arguing, but I was too stunned to initiate a reaction past the look on my face.

I had already settled in on one side of the bed next to the window, when Jet pulled back the sheets on the other side. The argument was probably partially my fault—I should have said something to Jet, but I didn't. Truthfully, I didn't think anything of it. Jet and I had shared a bed tons of times before—it wasn't a big deal—but Brad didn't see it that way.

"What are you doing?" he asked, turning to find Jet sitting in bed next to me.

"What do you mean?" Jet asked, "I'm going to sleep."

Brad clenched and unclenched his right fist. "With Marina?"

My eyes found the closed bathroom door. I desperately hoped Fallon would walk back out soon.

"It's not like we haven't slept together before," Jet said casually.

All color drained from Brad's face.

That was when I jumped in. "He means like slept-slept, notâ€|you knowâ€" I stuttered, reddening because I had basically just admitted that I was still a virgin to the two guys I loved.

"Then maybe I should sleep with Marina this time," said Brad, glaring at Jet.

Jet glared right back. "I don't think so," he said, "you'd take advantage of that."

Fallon, where were you?

"And you won't?"

"No. Marina and I slept in the same bed even before we were a couple," Jet explained.

"And technically Marina and I are just friends now too. So it shouldn't matter if we sleep in the same bed tonight," Brad argued.

That was when Jet stood up, getting level with Brad. Images of the two of them rolling around on the asphalt, trying to punch the living daylight out of each other, flashed through my mind.

"_I'm_ sleeping with Marina."

"No. _I_ _am_."

Both boys looked like they were about to start throwing fists. So much for getting along.

It was at that moment that Fallon emerged from the bathroom. "Actually, _I'll_ be sleeping with Marina," she said, apparently having heard the whole conversation, "So you two are going to have to share that bed." She smiled as she walked over and slid under the covers next to me. "Sleep tight. Oh, and do try not to kill each other during the night."

Clearly disgruntled, but not daring to argue further, Jet and Brad settled down in the other bed. Fallon shut off the light and I rolled over, closing my eyes.

It took me awhile to fall asleep. There was one thing that kept racking my brain. We weren't worried so much about getting in the facility tomorrowâ€"I was convinced that part of the plan would go smoothlyâ€"it was getting out that was going to be the problem.

13. Breaking In

****Thank you for all the reviews and great comments! If you haven't reviewed, please do! It would mean so much to me.****

****Okay, so this chapter took me longer than I expected. I honestly had been looking forward to writing this chapter for months, but when I finally sat down to write it, I drew a blank. So, I hope everything makes sense and you guys all love it!****

Things are different when you're alone. Things that you were so sure of when there were people with you become so unsure when you're alone. Like a plan for example. Something you might have thought was a good idea when your friends were there changes as soon as you're alone. It's no longer a good idea, in fact, you slowly see how it is quite possibly the worst idea you've ever thought of. It changes from a good idea to a poor idea to a bad idea to a horrible idea until you find yourself wondering why you even voiced the idea in the first place. Without your friends there to wipe away your doubtsâ€”to convince you the plan will workâ€”you quickly descend into hysterics.

Brad and Fallon left for the facility with Jet half an hour. I was already freaking out.

Half an hour and I was already convinced they were all going to die. The "what if" questions popping in my head grew more and more ridiculous as the minutes ticked by.

What if the hunters didn't believe Brad? What if they were taken? What if they did take Jet and then decided to torture him? What if they killed him? What if they took Brad because he can see auras? What if they tortured Fallon because of association? What if they had snipers on the roof to shoot them as soon as they spotted them?

My feet resorted to their usual nervous habitâ€”pacing around the roomâ€”while I waited, on the verge of hyperventilating. I was sure that had I had access to a car I would have gone after them. But, I didn't, and, the last little bit of reason inside me was thankful for that. Even though my brain couldn't seem to fathom it, I had to believe things would be okay. Brad and Fallon would be back soon and then the three of us would return for Jet.

Still, I couldn't help but play through the worst possible scenarios. And, every single one of them ended with someone dead. The one that disturbed me the most was Jet realizing he was going to die alone in one of those small cells I'd seen on Brad's blueprints. That scenario actually brought tears to my eyes. It wasn't just that he was dyingâ€”it was that he had to do so cold and alone. I wanted to be by his side, even if it meant I would be dying too.

It took me a full twenty minutes to get a hold of myselfâ€”most of the tear-wiping and nose-blowing occurring in the thirty seconds between hearing Brad's Charger pull up and when Brad and Fallon walked through the door.

"He's in," Brad said immediately.

Part of me sighed in relief but it wasn't a large enough part for my body to express that relief. I remained tense, biting my bottom lip and continuing to pace back and forth across the room.

And so the waiting began. Jet had been in the facility for less than an hour. We were supposed to give him three hours time to find his mother before we made our move to get him out.

There was no way I was going to last three hours.

Fallon seemed to sense this because she pulled me over to the table, sat me down, and began placing playing cards in front of me.

"Wha-what are you doing?" I asked.

She raised her eyebrows at me. "Trying to distract you."

I was about to tell her not to waste her time but decided against itâ€"all we had was time to waste. Fallon and I played cards for forty-five minutes while Brad sat on a bed, cleaning one of his guns.

At first, knowing that Brad would be armed when we returned comforted me, until I remembered that all the hunters in the facility would probably be armed as well. If it came to a gun fight we would be dead in seconds. Fallon had flat out refused to carry a gun, insisting she'd be fine without one. I had no idea why. If I were her I'd have taken it gladly, regardless of whether or not I knew how to fire it.

Every so often Brad would glance up from his gun at me. Incidentally that happened every time my thoughts wandered back to Jet being locked in a cell. Maybe it was just me, but Brad's expression always seemed to beg the question of whether I'd be just as worried if it were him inside the facility. I found myself wondering the same thing.

Time dragged on. I felt like I was driving on a single lane road behind the slowest driver in the world with nothing but a rocky ledge on either side of me. Only now, my frustration was directed at time rather than a car in front of me. I was way past impatient.

Despite my inability to wait, time did pass. And later rather than sooner, I did find myself in the back of Brad's Charger, a muzzle over my snout and my paws tied together. I tried to sneak peeks of the facility as we approached it. The shapeshifter prison looked simply like a storage warehouse, and I wondered what the hunters offered any passersby as a cover for what they really did inside. As we drew closer I laid back down on the seatâ€"I couldn't risk being noticed by any of the guards. I was supposed to be pretending to be unconscious. Brad was going to tell the guards that he'd given me an anesthesia to knock me out, but it wouldn't matter what he said if one of the guards saw me completely conscious through the window. Our escape plan wasn't a great one, but it depended on maintaining the element of surprise.

The car came to a stop and I felt my heart pound against my ribs, my fear beginning to take over. Although I could no longer see the place, every nerve in my body was telling to get the hell out of there. I had a really bad feeling about going inside. Had Jet been this scared? I hoped not. The only thing keeping me from shifting back into human form and telling Brad to turn the car around was the fact that Jet was locked inside. I knew nothing would keep me from protecting Jetâ€"I had willingly revealed myself as a shapeshifter to Brad last fall just to keep him from shooting Jetâ€"but that didn't mean I wasn't still afraid. I mean, while Brad hadn't hurt me, I had

been shot that day, coincidentally by his mother.

"You ready?" Brad asked, his eyes shifting back at me.

I closed my eyes, desperately trying to slow my rapidly beating heart. I gave him a short growl in response, which I'm sure he took to mean "let's get this over with." I just hoped that Jet had been able to find something on his mother in the limited time we gave him. What would we do if he hadn't been able to discover anything? Would we risk sneaking back in? I didn't want to go in now, let alone come back once we got out.

The car doors on either side opened, both Brad and Fallon hopping out. I stayed as still as possible and tried to keep my breathing even.

"What are you doing back here?" a voice barked, one I didn't recognize, assumedly a guard.

I could practically hear Fallon's eye roll. "We said we'd be back if we caught the other one," she said, "Well, we caught her."

"That was fast," came another voice I didn't recognize. Guard number two.

"We're that good," Fallon said confidently.

There was a pause where the guards seemed to be thinking over Fallon's words. What would we do if they refused to let us in?

"Look," Brad said, speaking up, "We've got another changing monster knocked out back here. Your boss seemed pretty interested in the last one we brought in. But if you two think he won't want a second, that's fine. We'll just kill her." There was a distinctive click as Brad loaded his gun. I was sure he was pointing it at my head. The image Brad holding a different gun to my head sprung to the front of my mind. If he wanted to, Brad could look really intimidating.

"Stop!" the first guard shouted. After a few seconds of silence, where I imagined Brad lowering his gun, the guard spoke again. "Follow me," he said, "and bring the animal."

The door closest to my head opened. I felt hands gingerly slide under my neck to my chest and around my backside, tucking my tail down.

"I promise I won't let anything happen to you in there," Brad whispered so that only I could hear. He then lifted me up off the soft leather. The light behind my eyelids increased as he pulled me out into the sun. I listened as his footsteps matched that of someone in front of him—the guard—and as another fell into step behind him—Fallon. I desperately hoped that the other guard would remain outside. It would be easy to take down one, and I was sure we could handle two if necessary, but it would also take more time to do so. And more time meant increased possibility of being heard. The loss of sunlight behind my closed eyes indicated that we had stepped inside, the door locking after Fallon.

We were in. I just hoped we could get out.

Brad seemed to sense my anxiety because his grip around my limp body tightened, pressing me closer to his chest. The warmth from his body against mine felt nice compared to the chilled temperature of the building. We walked for a minute before we came to a stop and there was a soft beep noise and a click. I knew I shouldn't of but I risked a peek. We were walking through a door I assumed had been closed. I noticed the guard pocketing a cardâ€”he must have used it to open the door.

I closed my eyes again as we entered a new hallway. Only it wasn't just the three of us anymore. My ears picked up on multiple people breathing. Crap. There was a lot. I couldn't tell how many, but there had to be at least five. We couldn't handle six guards on our own.

"Help me!" came a shrill, hysterical voice that definitely didn't belong to the guard. I almost opened my eyes to see who it was but then remembered I had to remain "unconscious," especially if there were more guards around.

"Please!" the voice came again. It belonged to a girl. My heart broke for herâ€”she sounded youngâ€”and she was probably scared to death. Who knows what the hunters had done to her. "I don't belong in here! I'm human! I am!" she screamed, "Look at me! Please!" The girl was gasping for breath now. "Get me out! They're going to kill me!"

Lying against his chest, I felt Brad flinch. Seeing the girl, let alone hearing her, had to be hard for him. I was sure someone in his family or group of hunters had sent captured shapeshifters here before. My breath caught in my throat when I realized it was possible that _Brad_ had sent someone here. I wanted to comfort him, to ease his guilt. He couldn't blame himself for what happened to the shapeshifter imprisoned in this facility.

The girl's scream died down after we passed her. We came to a stop again and I waited for the guard to swipe his guard, assuming we'd come to another door, but the beep never came. Instead, Brad quietly crouched down, setting me on the floor. I opened my eyes, confusedâ€”this wasn't supposed to happen, I was supposed to attackâ€”but just in time to see Brad hit the guard in the back of the head with the butt of his gun. I scrambled to my feet, glancing around. There was no one else in the hallway with us.

"Why did you do that?" Fallon demanded, stepping over the guard's skewed legs and plucking his keycard from the pocket I had seen him place it in at the last door.

"We can't leave them all here," Brad said, gesturing to a row of barred doors.

I stared down the hallway at the six doors. My ears had picked up on the breathing of six prisoners, not guards.

"This is supposed be a rescue not a riot," Fallon said.

I shifted back into human form, looking through the bars on the window of the first door. "He's right," I said, softly, staring at the cell's inhabitant. The girl was sitting on the floor with her

back to me. She had long, light brown hair and, while I couldn't see her face, I would have guessed her to be only a year or two older than me. "We can't leave them here."

Behind me, Fallon pursed her lips as Brad took the guard's keycard from her. However, I was still studying the girl in the cell. She had positioned herself so she was sitting in the only patch of sunlight in the small room. She turned her head to look at me. Her eyes were a startling bright green.

I don't know what made me do it, but I found myself searching the girl for an aura. It wasn't that I didn't expect to find one, in fact, I was sure I would. My eyes widened when I did.

"Brad," I whispered, not moving my gaze from the girl.

"What is it?"

"Come here," I said, reaching a hand up to the bars on the girl's door, "Look."

Brad raised his eyebrows but walked over to stand beside me. He followed my gaze to the girl, his eyes narrowing as he watched her. Less than a minute later, I heard his breath hitch. "Her aura," he whispered and I nodded.

"It's green," we said together. For once, Fallon was silent behind us.

"What is she?" Brad asked, but I couldn't answer him. I didn't know.

"She's not a shapeshifter," I said, turning away from the door.

Fallon looked like she wanted to ask something but was afraid of the answer she'd get. "What does that mean?"

"I don't know," I admitted.

Brad didn't speak. He ran down the hallway, stopping at each door to stare at the cell's occupants. When he reached the last door, cries erupted once more from the girl who had begged for help. "We'll get you out," Brad said soothingly to her, "I promise. Just hold on a bit longer." Then he turned to Fallon and I, and, pointing to each door one by one, he said, "Green, silver, pink, rainbow, brown, rainbow."

Not just green, but silver, pink and brown too? How many different supernaturals were being kept in this place? "Iâ€"I thought this was a prison for shapeshifters," I said slowly.

Brad ran a hand down the side of his face, worry plastered on it as his gaze flickered between the six doors. "Me too."

Fallon's eyes narrowed. "Shapeshifter hunters are only supposed to hunt shapeshifters. So how is it that theseâ€" her voice trailed off as she failed to come up with a proper term to describe the other supernaturals, "â€"guys got here?"

"I don't know," Brad said, his frustration echoed in his clipped tone, "Hunters don't even know other magical creatures exist."

Fallon scoffed. "Oh, I think they know."

I shot her a glare. We didn't need to argue right now. We needed to find Jet, help all the prisoners escape and then get out ourselves. "Do you think that card will open the cells?"

Brad looked down at the key Fallon had taken off the guard then back at the cells. "No," he said, "They have different keys for guards stationed inside and out. We need to find a guard in here."

I nodded, knowing it wouldn't be that easy.

"Come on," Brad said, striding back up to the door the guard was hunched against, "We need to keep moving." He swiped the key and the door unlocked. The next hallway was much longer and wider, and there weren't any cell doors, only normal doors with slots for papers next to each one. It reminded me of the doctor's office and just that thought sent a wave of chills down my back. I'm not sure whether it was lucky or not, but we ran right into another guard as soon as we stepped out into the hallway.

"Hey!" the man exclaimed, but before he could get another word out, Fallon attacked. It may sound ridiculous but it is really the only way I could have described what she did. Her movements were so fast I had trouble followed them and the next minute, the guard was lying on his back on the floor, his head lolled to one side.

I was stunned. Even Brad seemed impressed. "Where did you learn to do that?" I asked as she reached down, taking the keycard out of the guard's pocket.

She shrugged. "When I realized I couldn't shift, I figured I had to find another way to protect myself."

I couldn't help but smile. So that was why she didn't want a gun. "You. Are. Awesome."

She smirked at me. "Yeah, I know."

Ignoring us, Brad said, "You two go back through there and find John. There was another door to more cells by the others."

"Where are you going?" Fallon asked.

"I want to find out what's really going on," Brad answered, his eyebrows furrowing, "There aren't supposed to be other supernaturals in here."

I nodded and turned to follow Fallon back the way we came as Brad headed in the opposite direction. Coming to a halt just before the door, I spun back around. "Brad! Wait!" He stopped and I rushed back over to him, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Be careful," I whispered in his ear.

Parting, his lips turned up in a half smile. "I will." Then he disappeared.

"Come on!" Fallon yelled, exasperated, "Who knows how much time we have before they realize we're here?"

We ran back into the hallway with the six cell doors, Fallon sliding the new keycard in each lock. The doors swung open and confused heads began appearing in the hallway.

The girl with the green aura rushed into the arms of a boy with a silver aura. They didn't seem to care that they were free, only that they were together. The boy was Asian, although what specifically I didn't know. I was never really good at distinguishing ethnicities. And, despite not looking for his aura, he seemed to have a silvery tint to his skin. I wished I knew what kind of supernaturals they were.

"The exit's through there," I told the prisoners, pointing to the door we'd come through with the guard earlier—the guard who was still sacked out on the floor. The girl who had been in hysterics before immediately shifted into a black panther and dashed through the door ahead of me.

Fallon and I headed through another door to find a hallway lined with more cells. Not bothering to ask who—or rather what—was in each cell, she ran the card through the lock and each door swung open. "You're all free," she announced, "No need to thank us."

I glanced at each open door, hoping to see Jet's head poking out of one but he wasn't there. I was beginning to get nervous. What if we couldn't find him?

"Marina," said Fallon, "Over here."

I ran over to where she was standing, beside what looked like a steel door. Through the glass of the window, I saw a dark shape lying in the middle of the square room. "Jet!" I exclaimed but he didn't respond.

Fallon ran the keycard through the slot but nothing happened.

"Try again," I said, desperately pounding on the glass, but Jet still didn't stir.

"Nothing," Fallon said, staring through the glass at Jet, "Marina, I think he's unconscious."

I snatched the key from her hands. "We have to get him out of there." I ran it through the lock multiple times but the small light above it kept blinking red.

Fallon gently placed a hand on my shoulder. "It won't work," she said, "We have to find another way."

"How?"

She frowned, walking down to the end of the hallway. "There are more doors like Jet's through here," she said, motioning through another door.

"Do you think there's another kind of key for these doors?" I

asked.

"Probably, but we don't have time to figure out which guard would have it."

She was right. We didn't have a lot of time. "What about a universal key? Or a switch?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like a button or something that would open all the doors," I quickly explained, "You know, in case they needed to evacuate the place."

Fallon considered this. "If they had such a thing it would probably be heavily guarded—or hidden." She frowned and then slowly a smile crept onto her face. Looking up at me, she said, "I think I know where it is. Come on."

We ran through door after door, turning left then right then left again until I was thoroughly lost. As we took down our third guard, I gasped, "Fallon, do you know where you're going?"

She nodded. "According to the blue prints it should be right around here."

We turned another corner, and there, at the very end of the hallway was a single door. It looked like a normal door, like one to an office or something. However, there were two guards stationed outside it—guards that rushed us as soon as they spotted us. I shifted into a lion, taking down one guard while Fallon handled the other.

A shout of pain erupted from the other side of the door and Fallon and I exchanged looks then burst through the door. I most certainly did not expect to find what I did.

The room on the other side of the door was a decent size for an office. It even looked like an office—it had a large desk and cushioned chair behind it as well as several file cabinets lining the wall. However, none of this surprised me. What surprised me was the chair in front of the large desk. The chair had multiple wires attached to it, and in it sat a boy with unkempt dirty-blond hair. Sweat was steadily trickling down his face, and despite clearly being in pain, he looked up at me and smiled.

"Tommy?!"

He chuckled. "Hey, Marina."

I rushed forward to undo the ropes holding him in the chair.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," came a harsh voice from the shadows to my right.

A man I hadn't noticed when I first barged in the room, stood in the corner, a set of controls in his hand—controls that seemed to be attached to the wires hanging from Tommy's chair. Whoever this man was he had been using electrocution to torture my friend. But Tommy was a sorcerer, why would shapeshifter hunters want him? I thought back to the numerous different supernaturals Fallon and I had set

free. Exactly what were the hunters doing in this facility?

Tommy's torturer reached his other hand up to what looked like a fire alarm stationed on the wall next to him. I had a bad feeling it wasn't a fire alarm though. Smiling, the man pulled the lever on the wall down. And that was when an alarm started blaring.

I think it was safe to say they knew we're here.

14. Lockdown

****Thank you to everyone who reviewed! You never fail to make my day! If you weren't for you guys I'm not sure I would have continued this trilogy. Marina's story has truly grown bigger than I could have ever imagined, and it is all thanks to you my faithful fans, readers, and reviewers! So, thank you again!****

****I have to admit that this chapter is slightly shorter than the others, and that is because it is kind of more of a filler chapter. But, just because it is a filler chapter doesn't mean there isn't vital information hidden inside *wink wink*. Anyway, I hope you enjoy! :)****

"You're trapped now," the man said, "All the doors to the outside are secure. There's no way out."

Fallon stalked up to the man and promptly punched him in the face, knocking him out. Man, she really had a knack for that. "Well, sorry if I still feel like trying," she spat.

Kneeling down next to Tommy, I asked, "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "He didn't get very far before you stormed in."

I started to undo his restraints while Tommy studied Fallon—who happened to still be standing over the man I would have bet was in charge of the facility looking very smug. She began moving around the room, opening all the drawers in the desk and filing cabinets.

"Who is she?" Tommy whispered. Well, it wasn't really a whisper, more like his normal volume, but with the alarm still sounding in the background he could have breathed the words.

"My friend," I told him, "I'll explain later. Once we get out of here." The final knot of his ties came undone and, swinging his arm over my shoulders, I pulled him up out of the chair and towards where Fallon stood. "Tommy, Fallon. Fallon, Tommy."

"Nice to meet you," Tommy said, smiling at her.

Fallon was clearly taken aback by Tommy's good manners, but then, slowly, a smile crept onto her own face. I wasn't exactly surprised by this—everyone liked Tommy—it just goes to show that Tommy's charm was stronger than Fallon's lack of tact. "Uh, you too," she mumbled.

I glanced at Tommy who seemed to slowly regain his strength—he was leaning on me less and less with every passing second. "Tommy," I said, "What are you doing here? Why did they take you?"

But before Tommy could respond, Fallon interrupted. "I think we should walk and talk," she said, motioning towards the door, "It's not here and seeing as all the guards know there are intruders"not to mention we still have to find a way to get Jet out of that cell"we better keep moving."

Tommy let go of me, only slightly leaning on the desk for support. "John's here too?" he asked, "Wait"what's he doing in a cell?"

Fallon shrugged. "We put him there."

Tommy's head snapped in my direction, his eyes wide, disbelieving. He was definitely asking whether Fallon was lying"and probably hoping she was.

I quickly launched into the story of how Jet discovered there was a possibility his mother was being kept here and the plan we executed to get him in here. "But now we can't get him out because they put him in a special cell and gave him some drug that knocked him out."

"And you're looking for something to get him out of this special cell?"

I nodded.

Tommy hobbled over to his unconscious torturer, rifling through the man's pockets until he pulled out a small silver key. Holding it up to show Fallon and I, he said, "This key opens a safe in the warden's office, and I bet there's something in there that can open all the cell doors."

I smiled. "Tommy, you're a genius."

"Eh, that's what happens when you're life's ambition is to become a human library," he laughed.

But Fallon only narrowed her eyes at him. "Isn't this the warden's office?"

Tommy shook his head. "This is their decoy office in case the local law enforcement stop by," he explained, "I bet the only things you found in those drawers was information on storage shipments, right?"

Fallon didn't answer, but she didn't have to. With her, no response usually meant yes. She didn't like being bested.

"So where is his real office?" I asked, looking down at the man that ran this supernatural prison.

"I passed it as they brought me down here," he said, "Come on, this way."

We"Fallon rather grudgingly"followed Tommy back out of the office and down the long hallway. The guards we had taken out before had mysteriously disappeared. This did not comfort me, in fact, with the alarm still blaring through the building, it made me even more

uneasy. They had probably run off to get backup or engage an extra security measure. The sooner we found Brad again and a way to open Jet's cell, the better.

When we rounded the corner our eyes met what I would have previously considered to be an impossible sight. Many of the prisoners Fallon and I had set free did not escape when we told them to. Instead, four of them were freely battling a group of guards in the narrow hallway.

The girl with the light brown hair and green aura was calmly kneeling on the tile floor, her hands spread out in front of her. The tiles separated as cracks began to appear in the earth below, causing the guards in front of her to stumble and fall. I still didn't know what kind of supernatural she was but whatever she was it was obvious had the power to move solid rock, even cause earthquakes. That was one hell of a power.

A spark of silver light caught my eye, snatching my attention away from the girl with the green aura. The guy with the silver aura, who I had seen embrace the earthquake girl, shot through the air towards the few guards who had managed to keep their feet from sliding out from under them. A pair of glistening, silver wings—a color that matched the aura surrounding his body—had sprouted from his back, allowing him to soar above earthquake girl and attack the guards.

A horse shapeshifter kicked a guard squarely in the chest while someone with a pink aura moved so fast through the guards, tripping them, that I couldn't actually see the person, only the blur of their aura.

It was truly an amazing sight—four different supernaturals working together to take down a common enemy. Of course I still wished I knew what the green, silver and pink auras meant. It occurred to me to ask Tommy what they were—being a "human library" he probably knew—he had discovered that a rainbow aura was a shapeshifter and a turquoise one was a mermaid last year. However, watching the fight unfold before me I knew now wasn't exactly the best time to ask him.

"Let me guess," Fallon remarked, wrinkling her nose at the fight before her, "we have to get through there."

"Stay behind me," Tommy ordered. He took a deep breath and slowly raised his hands in front of him. As he marched forward into the melee, he began frantically whispering in a language that I could only assume was Latin—the language all spells were written in.

I didn't know what Tommy was doing, but I listened, following close behind him. All I could do was hope for the best and be prepared to shift into a giant cat or something if his spell didn't work.

But it did.

Both Fallon and I yelled, "Look out!" when a guard first launched himself at us, baton raised, electric sparks spitting from the end of it, but all Tommy did was move his open-palmed hands to face the oncoming guard. When the guard got within two feet of Tommy's hands he crashed to the ground. It looked like he had run full force into an invisible wall. If we weren't in such a dire situation the guard's face smushed against non-existent glass would have been

comical.

Another two guards ran at us but were also knocked down by Tommy's invisible shield. Once we made it through the largest part of the battle, Tommy lowered his hands and we ran for it. Over my shoulder, I saw a guard move to follow us only to get lifted off his feet by the guy with the silver aura and thrown harshly back onto the crumbling ground.

At the end of the hall Tommy turned right and pointed to a door at the very end of the hall. "There," he said, "That's the warden's real office." The sign on the door read "Custodial." It was the only door on the hall and the only way out was to go back the way we came.

The three of us stopped just outside the door. It wasn't locked or even shut like we would have expected. The door was cracked open and, despite the sound of the alarm, we heard someone moving inside.

We each exchanged a look, preparing to fight. One hand raised, Tommy swung the door open the rest of the way and my shoulders immediately slumped in relief.

"Brad!" I exclaimed. He was seated behind a large desk, much like the one in the fake office, clearly searching through something on the computer in front of him.

He had pulled his gun on us when we opened the door but when his eyes locked on my face he lowered it. "Marina," he sighed, his own relief reflected in the gushing sound of his voice. But he frowned again when his eyes landed on Tommy. "Tommy?" he asked, "Whatâ€"where?"

"Later," I interrupted him, striding into the room and moving to stand behind him, looking over his shoulder at the computer screen. "Find anything?"

"Sort of," Brad said, frowning at the screen in front of him, "There are a bunch of email exchanges between the warden here and someone who signs his name 'XP', but they're all written in code."

Fallon laughed. "XP? Like the computer system?"

Brad ignored her. "I can't understand what they're saying in the emails but this XP guys is definitely higher up on the chain of command than the warden, possibly even the highest."

"But you're a hunter," Fallon said, picking up a diamond shaped paper weight, "Don't you know who you're big boss is?"

Brad shook his head. "No," he admitted, "The only boss I've ever known is my own father."

"Could heâ€" " Fallon started but Brad quickly cut her off.

"No. My dad isn't this XP person."

"Okay," I said, jumping in, "So we can't decipher the emails, but is there anything else? Maybe on the hard drive?"

"Yeah, here," Brad said, closing the window with the many emails and

opening a folder of files, "There's tons of different experiments, but most of them have been terminated."

My eyes scanned the statements he'd opened. Based on my brief encounter with him, the warden didn't exactly strike me as the type of guy to just give up. "Any idea why?"

"It doesn't say but I have a theory," Brad said, grimacing slightly.

I raised my eyebrows at him to tell him to keep talking.

Brad sighed and closed all the files he'd opened. "All the experiments have been terminated except one." He clicked on a folder that was labeled "Active Projects." There was only one folder inside it. "They call the experiment 'Project Extraction', but the folder is password protected. I can't open it."

I frowned, rereading the name of the locked folder over and over in my head. Project Extraction. Project Extraction. That name could indicate a number of things, but unless we found a way to open the folder there was no point worrying about an experiment we knew nothing about.

Brad seemed to share my resignation. "There's also lots of documents and blueprints indicating that the facility intends to expand, and quickly."

"Expand? Expand how?"

Brad seemed reluctant to answer. Cringing he said, "To make room for more prisoners."

I studied the documents Brad had pulled up. "But this doesn't make sense. It says here that they're looking to add a hundred more high security cells in just two weeks. Why would they want them completed so quickly? And how?"

"I don't know how they plan on accomplishing that but if they're trying to get it done quickly that could only mean one thing."

"And what's that?" Fallon asked.

"They're expecting a lot more prisoners," Brad said softly.

We were all quiet as the severity of that knowledge sunk in. We didn't know how, but the facility was planning on having at least a hundred new supernatural prisoners within the coming weeks. A million questions raced through my mind. Where did they expect to find these supernaturals? How were they going to capture them all? Could hunters really expect to face a group of supernaturals like that girl with the green aura, who could literally move the earth beneath their feet and expect to win?

Finally, I broke the silence. "We can't worry about their plans now," I said, "Our first priority is getting Jet and getting out of here."

Brad nodded. "I found a safe in the wall over there but it won't open without a key and a code."

Smiling, Tommy pulled the silver key he stole off the warden out of his pocket and walked over to the similarly colored safe. He stuck the key in the keyhole and turned. The small screen above a number pad came to life, giving Tommy thirty seconds to enter the correct four digit code.

"Great," Fallon said, pursing her lips as she looked over Tommy's shoulder, "Now what are we going to do? We don't know the code."

"Maybe we don't have to," Tommy said. Brad, Fallon and I watched as Tommy held his right hand over the number pad and began speaking in quickly in Latin once more. A few seconds later a magical force began pressing on the numbers in front of Tommy's hand. First the key for the number seven was pressed, then three, then three again and finally seven. The code 7337 flashed on the screen twice before we heard a click and the safe door opened.

Inside was a device with a large black button in the center and a plain manila file folder. I took the device while Brad grabbed the folder and immediately began rifling through the papers inside.

"Is that your universal key?" Fallon asked, eyeing the device in my hands. Besides the large black button, the device had a small screen listing the numbers of what I assumed was all the prison doors in the facility—"most of which were listed as locked.

I glanced up at her. "Let's hope so," I said and then pressed down on the black button.

Nothing happened.

"Well," Fallon pouted, "That was anticlimactic."

"They're down here!" we heard a voice shout. All four of our heads snapped to the open office door where we saw a guard calling to others at the end of the hall.

Fallon rushed to close and lock the door. But I had a feeling a locked door wasn't going to be enough. Brad shoved a couple papers into the back pocket of his dark jeans, tossing the remains of the file folder aside, and rushed to help Fallon move one of the metal file cabinets in front of the door. A second later pounding erupted behind it as if dozens of rocks were being thrown at the slab of wood.

"Uhh, I think we better hurry," Fallon said, her eyes nervously scanning the quaking door.

Brad held out his hand to me. "Can I take a look at that?"

I handed over the device, hoping Brad could find some way to fix it—"if it was even broken.

He flipped it over in his hands, taking in its shape and size. "I've seen something like this before," he said, examining it, "I think there's a second one on the wall in that main hallway."

"Great," I huffed, attempting to hide my fear, "So now all we have to

do is get past the dozens of guards waiting out there to capture and or kill us?"

"We can't stay here," Brad said, looking around the room, "They'll get through that door eventually."

There was no other way out of the office. We all knew that.

I turned desperately to Tommy. "You don't have some huge knock-out spell or something, do you?"

Tommy shook his head. "No, sorry."

We had to fight. It was our only option. And if my guess about the number of guards that stood outside the door was correct, we really didn't stand a chance, supernatural or not.

"The vent," Fallon suddenly whispered.

"Huh?"

"The vent," she said again, more confidently. "We can escape through there."

Brad, Tommy and I studied the small opening in the wall.

"I don't know how small you think we are, but we're definitely not small enough to fit through that hole," Brad said, looking at Fallon like she was crazy.

Fallon just smiled back at him and part of me wondered if maybe she was crazy. "_We_ can't," she said, slyly, "But Marina can."

15. Pandemonium

****THANK YOU for all the reviews! I seriously didn't expect that many for the last chapter, so thanks! You guys rock! As an extra thank you I am giving you the next chapter early :D****

****So, this chapter is much longer than the previous one, and it's got a lot more action in it. I really do like this chapter (and I'm not just saying that because I wrote it). A little of everything found its way into this one: action, humor, suspenseâ€¦I even managed to sneak an intimate scene in there. Anyway, hope you guys like it and thanks again for reviewing!****

"Nuh-uh." I shook my head vigorously. "No way."

"Come on," Fallon said, "Just like we practiced, remember?"

"No!" I told her, "Fallon, it's not happening."

Tommy and Brad stared at us, oblivious to what we were arguing about.

"The situation calls for a small animal, so you adjust."

I glared at her.

"It's our only option," she pointed out.

I could feel the two boys' eyes on me. "Fine," I growled and then gestured to Tommy and Brad beside me, "You twoâ€"turn around. And no peeking."

Brad smirked at me. "Not like there's anything under there I haven't seen before."

If he hadn't turned his back to me just then I would have slapped him across the face. I wasn't in the mood to deal with his cheek.

As I pulled the torn dress over my head, I mouthed the words "I hate you" to Fallon.

She only smiled wider and held out her hand, in which I shoved my only article of clothing. "Sure you do," she said as I shifted into a tiny mouseâ€"the same one I was when Fallon snuck me into see Jet that night in the tribe. Even though that was only a couple days ago, it already felt like a lifetime ago. I had been so concerned with getting out of the tribe and away from the chief, I would have never believed I would need to escape specifically designed hunter prison. I definitely wouldn't have believed that I would need to turn into a mouse again in order to do so. The mouse was really turning out to be the most useful new animal in my arsenal.

Fallon bent over and let me scurry into her free handâ€"I was small enough to fit perfectly in her palm.

"Is it safe to turn around?" Brad asked, hesitantly looking over his shoulder.

"Here," Fallon said, holding her hand (with me in it) out to Brad.

Raising his eyebrows, he gave her a look that clearly said "what-am-I-supposed-to-do?"

She rolled her eyes at him and pointed to the vent near the ceiling. "I can't reach up there."

Brad obediently held out his hands, cupping them together as if he was expecting me to leak out like water. I ran out of Fallon's hand and into Brad's. His hands were not only much larger but also rougher against the tiny pads of my paws. They shook a little as he pulled his hands back towards his chest, afraid of either dropping or squishing me.

He looked down at me and smiled. "She's cute," he said.

Because I couldn't glare at him, I did something better.

"Ow!" Brad exclaimed, jostling me in his hands but was careful not to drop me, "She bit me!"

Fallon laughed out loud. "I'm clearly rubbing off on her," she said, crossing her arms over her chest, "I would have bit you too."

Shooting Fallon a glare, he turned towards the air vent and whispered

bitterly to me, "It was a compliment, you know."

I knew that, but it was kind of fun to mess with him. He was always pushing my buttons, why not enact a little revenge?

The pounding on the door increased and if my tiny mouse ears weren't mistaken a creaking caused by strain to the hinges followed. We needed to get out of here, and fast.

The boys seemed to sense, or at least hear, the same thing because Tommy quickly unscrewed the vent and Brad lifted his hands high enough for me to crawl inside.

Even though I knew our lives depended on it, I really did not like being in the vent. The dust was so thick it covered my paws and the small space smelled so rotten I was sure something had died in it ages ago and was now in the process of decomposing. I just hoped that I wasn't unfortunate enough to run into the remains of the poor creature.

There was a clunking sound of metal on metal as the device to open the prison doors was placed in the vent behind me.

"Take the key with you," came Fallon's voice from down below, "Try to get out near the main hallway and then use it to unlock all the cell doors. Hopefully the release of the rest of the prisoners will draw away some of the guards outside and we'll be able to get out of this damned office."

Her plan made sense. With more supernaturals running around the compound the guards would have to disperse. There was also the added bonus that Jet would be free and there would be five of us to fight any attempts from the guards to stop us from escaping. There was only one problem.

The device was bigger than I was.

When shapeshifting, I not only took on the form of the animal but also the strength. I had never noticed much difference in my physical strength when I shifted into my wolfâ€"maybe I was a bit strongerâ€"but I certainly noticed it as a mouse. With my tiny body came little strength. I knew I was fast but I wasn't strong. I hoped I was strong enough to take the device with me.

I scurried over to it and did my best to push it farther into the vent with my nose. It was heavy, but it moved. Pushing the thing all the way back to the main hallway wasn't going to be easy but, like Fallon said, it was our only option. We couldn't fight our way through the dozens of guards outside the door. But if there were only eight or nine, we stood a chance.

I ran as fast as I could through the vent, doing my best to find my way back to the main hallway. I sincerely hoped I was going the right way, but I probably would have had a hard time navigating the normal hallways nevermind a two by two enclosed space. A space which, I should add, was very dark. Although part of me was glad I couldn't see well because I was sure my little brown paws had turned grey from the thick layer of dust.

A spot of light appeared at the end of the tunnel and I ran harder,

pushing the device towards it faster. It wasn't my smartest move. I ended up ramming the grate covering the vent.

Great.

Fallon's genius plan had run into a dead endâ€”literally. How was I supposed to move the grate to get out of the vent? I was barely able to push the stupid device nevermind push the grate open. I ran to the edge of the vent and looked out through the slits.

Okay, I couldn't panic. Just like Fallon saidâ€”I had to adjustâ€”I had to find the right animal that would allow me to escape the vent. But I couldn't think of a single animal that would not only be small enough to still fit in the vent but also strong enough to get out. If only tiny people existedâ€”I could have reached a hand through the narrow opening and untwisted the screws.

I racked my brain for an animal, any animal, that would help my situation but came up empty. There was only one thing I could do, and it wasn't going to be pleasant.

Two thoughts ran through my head as I prepared myself to shift: "this better work" and "this is going to hurt like hell."

I scrunched my eyes closed and shifted back into my human form.

The effect was immediate. My head slammed against the grate, pushing it out and detaching it from the wall. It clattered noisily to the ground, but, with the alarm going off and guards and prisoners scattered around the compound, the sound went unnoticed. Like the grate, I found myself becoming a slave to gravity as I fell head over feet to the floor. I did my best to roll as I hit the ground, trying to avoid breaking any bone. I succeeded, but, as I sat up to take in my surroundings, I realized I was going to have some pretty nasty bruises covering my body by tomorrow, not to mention a mountain-sized bump on top of my head.

Grabbing the device that had landed beside my leg, I stood up and looked down the hall I had fallen into. If I remembered correctly, I was only one door away from the main hallway.

Wishing that I didn't run into any guards, or at least that the guards didn't look twice at a naked girl running through their halls, I headed towards the center of the compound. I laughed to myselfâ€”it would take a miracle for someone not to notice me.

I rushed through the door just as I heard an unfamiliar voice shout "Stop!" Naturally, I didn't listen to her. Swiveling my head all around I frantically looked for the second key Brad mentioned. I spotted something on the far wall that appeared to be similarly shaped to the device. I made a mad dash for the second half of the device just as the guard following me came through the door.

"Stop!" she shouted again, but I ignored her.

I flipped the device upright and slid it into the holder on the wall.

"No!" the guard yelledâ€”she had almost reached me, "Don'tâ€”"

She cut off when I did exactly what she didn't want me to doâ€”I pressed the large black buttonâ€”and all the color drained from her face. I would have bet that this was the last place she wanted to be.

The device lit up and, despite all the noise and commotion, I knew I had worked this time. The doors separating the hallways sprung open and down them I could see all the cell doors swinging forward, letting every prisoner out. A new head popped out of each doorway, a smile planted on all the prisoners' faces.

Some ran one way, convinced theirs was the quickest to the exit, while some ran the opposite way, immediately joining in the riot, and others just stood in the middle of the hall like they hadn't known freedom in so long that they didn't know what to do with it. But with the return of the guards came the return of their senses, and those simply standing around either jumped into an ongoing fight or initiated one.

It was absolute chaos.

But amidst the ferocious animals, the fast beating of wings, the sound of crackling electricity from the guards' weapons, the sudden gushes of wind, andâ€”oh yeahâ€”the flaming balls of fire soaring through the air, a familiar head appeared in the doorframe of one of the cells.

"Jet!" I shouted, rushing over to him, "You're awake!"

Gazing around at the frenzied scene before him, he said, "Are you sure? Cause I think I might still be dreaming."

"Come on," I said, taking his hand and pulling him back in the direction of the warden's office, "we have to get the others."

"Whatever happened to getting out of here quickly and quietly?" he asked. His eyes widened and he quickly grabbed me by arms. Pressing my back against the wall, he encircled me with his body, shielding me from the ball of fire that flew past us.

I breathed in the air between usâ€”air that seemed to be getting warmer by the secondâ€”something that I was sure had nothing to do with the fire being thrown.

"That plan was left outside with the car," I said, attempting humor, but my voice came out sounding more like it was weighed down by a hundred bricks rather than weightless as a joking tone should be.

His beautiful green eyes stared down at me. He seemed to be deciding whether or not to laugh. Then his gaze shifted downwards and I became painfully aware of how close we were. I could feel the heat from his body moving around me, caressing my skin. Only an inch or two stood between us, the space wavering every time one of us inhaled a shaking breath.

He seemed to be hovering around meâ€”protecting me but purposely not touching meâ€”even restraining himself. I could tell by the conflicted look on his face that he wanted nothing more than to touch

me, to hold me. And, for a minute there, I thought his control would break and he would wrap me in his arms, his lips devouring mine. But he didn't.

He turned his head and dropped his arms, allowing me to walk freely in the hallway and away from him. I could see it thenâ€”how I was breaking his heart. How even though he knew I loved him, the fact that I still hadn't made a decision was saddening him just as much as choosing to be with Brad would. I couldn't drag it out any longer. I wanted to hug himâ€”to comfort himâ€”but I knew that it would only make things worse. So instead, I scooted sideways slightly, increasing the distance between us.

"Come on," I said again, my voice strained with emotion. I didn't want to lose him, but I didn't want to lose Brad either.

Shaking my head, I tried to push my twisted love-life to the back of my mind as I shifted into my wolf form and, not saying a word, Jet followed suit.

The halls were full of guards, escaped prisoners, and even a few people in white lab coats, but Jet and I darted by each of them with ease, as if they were merely the stationary trees in the woods at home. When we reached the end of the hall that held the warden's office, I saw that Fallon had been rightâ€”most of the guards outside the office door had left to deal with the increasing number of supernaturals roaming the facility. Only four guards remained.

Jet and I charged them, catching the two closest off guard. They teetered, trying to maintain balance but we hit them from behind, knocking them to the ground. Leaving the barred door, the other two guards turned to face us. We growled and snapped at them, drawing closer. They held their electric batons out in front of them but couldn't seem to stop their bodies from shaking with fear.

Just then the office door behind them slammed open, revealing a very smug Fallon with Brad and Tommy flanked behind her.

"I thought I heard you," she said, eyeing the two remaining guards.

The guards glanced at the five of us and then at each other before making a break for the open office. They were clearly not the trained killers Brad's family was.

Both Jet and I shifted back into human form and Fallon handed us our clothes from her bag.

"Let's get out of here," I said. Everyone agreed and we ran back down the hall and into the mayhem. "Which way?"

The whole place felt like a giant maze to me. It was a miracle I had found the main hallway and the warden's office again. I couldn't be relied upon to find us a way out though.

"The exit's to your left," Brad said.

"We can't get out through there," Fallon said, worry creeping onto her face, "Remember what the warden said? All the doors to the outside are locked down. Why do you think all the prisoners are still

here?"

"So what do we do?"

"We find another way out," Jet said.

"But—" Fallon started, only Brad cut her off.

"He's right. There has to be another way." A smile tugged at his lips. "Even if we all have to crawl through the air vents. Either way we can't just stand around and wait to be captured."

"Let's try this way," Tommy said, gesturing to the right and leading the way. We followed him through the halls, slowing when the color of the walls changed from a boring beige to a bright, eerie white. We turn a corner only to find it a dead end.

But huddled on the floor of that dead end was a small girl with light blonde hair. Standing over her were two guards, poised to attack. Tommy and Brad sprung into action—Tommy using a spell to pin a guard against the wall while Brad hit the other over the head with his gun. The girl gave a soft cry, cowering even more when both boys took a step towards her.

"Stop," I told them, slowly moving closer to the girl. She couldn't have been more than twelve years old. "She's terrified." I watched her, widening my gaze to find her aura.

"She has a golden aura," Brad said at the same time I realized this myself.

I crouched down so I was at the same level as the girl. Her startling violet eyes shifted from me to Tommy and then back to me. "What are you," I asked softly, then added, "We won't hurt you."

The girl gulped but didn't move her gaze off of me. "A faerie," she whispered, then pointed to Tommy, "You're a sorcerer."

I glanced back at him but if he was surprised the girl knew this he didn't show it. He simply nodded.

Relaxing slightly, the girl turned back to me. "But what are you?" she asked. Her eyes found Jet for a second. "And him?"

"Shapeshifters," I told her, "I'm Marina. This is John, Tommy, Brad, and Fallon."

"Lila," she said.

"Umm, do I need to remind you all that we are still trapped in here?" Fallon said.

I held a hand out to Lila. "We're trying to escape, would you like to come with us?"

She nodded slowly before taking my hand and allowing me to help her stand. The six of us backtracked down the hall. The atmosphere was definitely different in this area of the facility. The halls were almost quiet and every sound echoed like a shout in the Grand Canyon.

It was practically deserted.

Lila didn't let go of my hand as we continued to wander through the halls. I wondered where she had come from, if her family was still looking for her, and what it meant to be a faerie. We rounded a corner and immediately ducked as one of the guard's electric batons came flying at us. I yanked Lila towards the tile floor to keep her out of harm's way. I was starting to rethink the whole deserted aspect of this part of the facility. When seeing that the baton had landed safely far away from my friends, I looked up to see another fight taking place. I immediately recognized the two supernaturals from earlier—the girl with the green aura and the guy with the silver one—fighting at least a dozen guards. Despite their efforts it was clear they were outnumbered. The girl's powers continued to amaze me as I noticed how she had summoned vines and tree branches out of nowhere to tie up three or four guards. The ability to create earthquakes and the ability to control plant life? Whoever—whatever—this girl was, she was not to be toddled with. Despite the girl's amazing powers, the guy with the silver aura (and silver wings) seemed to realize that they were outnumbered.

"Kiara!" he shouted, "Get back!"

The girl seemed to know what the boy was about to do because she didn't hesitate to backpedal until she bumped right into Fallon.

The seven of us watched as the guy walked up to the battalion of guards. At first I thought my eyes were deceiving me—that I had inhaled some sort of hallucinogenic or suddenly needed glasses. But my eyes weren't lying. I watched, stunned, as the guy with the silver aura grew larger and larger. Not only did he grow taller but he also grew wider, his proportions never changing. He grew until he filled the hallway, blocking the guards from view. I had clearly not met enough supernaturals, because this guy's ability amazed me just as much, if not more, than the girl with the green aura.

The guy with the silver aura—who had to be at least fifteen feet tall by now—simply swiped a hand and knocked six guards to the ground. Another swipe of his oversized hand and the last six guards were knocked out. He then began to shrink back down to normal size.

Once he was a little less than six feet tall again, he turned and took Kiara's hand in his. When he looked up and saw the numerous shocked expressions on him, he shrugged, his silver wings slowly beating behind him. "What?"

Lila seemed to duck behind me even more at the sight of the guy. Why was she so afraid of him? It wasn't like he was going to attack us—he was clearly on our side.

Kiara—who I was starting to suspect was silver-wings/freaky-growing guy's girlfriend—smiled at us. "I'm Kiara," she said, "And this is Kye."

I smiled politely back at her, after all, she was earthquake girl as I had previously dubbed her and I definitely didn't want to get on her bad side.

Brad, however, clearly wasn't thinking about Kiara's amazing

powersâ€"or, maybe he was. "I'm sorry, you can control the earth, but what are you?"

Kiara only chuckled. "A nymph," she said, "and I don't control the earthâ€"no one canâ€"I communicate with the earth and ask it for favors from time to time."

I raised my eyebrows at herâ€"but not in disbeliefâ€"in awe. She merely had to ask nicely and the earth would move for her.

Kye scowled at us. "Kiara," he said curtly, "We don't have time for pleasantries."

Kiara rolled her eyes but nodded to him. "We think the best way out is through the labs," she told us, "There's a door there that leads to the roof."

Trying not to think about how not all of us could fly and how we planned on getting off the roof, we agreed to follow Kiara and Kye. We really didn't have a better idea. Blindly running around the whole compound wasn't going to get us very far, and it certainly was not going to get us outside.

Tommy and Fallon fell into step behind Kiara and Kye, with Jet behind them, Lila and I behind Jet, and Brad bringing up the rear.

We turned left then right then again, until Kiara called from the front, "The labs are just up here on our left."

But that was when we heard it. Not just pounding of footsteps but marchingâ€"the marching of dozens of boots. More guards. And from the sound of it, a lot more than we could handle, even with seven of us ready and willing to fight.

"Quick! This way!" Kiara shouted, as she ran down the hall and ducked inside a room.

Squeezing Lila's hand, I followed. The room was dark but I could tell that we were in some sort of laboratoryâ€"only it wasn't like the science labs in the high school. There were a lot more high tech machines and silver examination tables that I thought were only used in coroner's offices.

Once everyone was inside, Kiara shut the door and locked it. We were all quiet. Hiding was our best optionâ€"we just had to wait for them to look someplace else for us and then we could sneak up to the roof. Beside me, Lila was practically shaking in fear; both her hands gripped my arm so tightly I was sure I would have small finger shaped bruises there tomorrow.

The marching drew closer and closer until they were right outside our door. Then it stopped.

Me, and everyone around me, held their breath.

"They're in here!" we heard a guard shout. The man on the other side of the door tried the doorknob, but, of course, it didn't turn.

"How did they find us?" I whispered to the group. I glanced around at my friends and allies until my eyes came to rest on Fallon, who was

making a slightly disgusted, slightly annoyed face.

"I think it has something to do with the life-sized Tinkerbelle next to you," she said, pointing to Lila.

I looked down at Lila and, for the first time, noticed a layer of gold dust on the floor around her feet—"gold dust that left a trail all the way under the door. "What?" I started, but I didn't get to finish my question.

A solid _thud_ sounded in the room as Brad dropped to the floor, unconscious.

16. Three Wishes

****New chapter! Yay! Thank you to everyone who wrote reviews. Although I know pretty much all of you are rooting for Jet, I hope that you were at least *_*a little*_* worried about Brad.*****

"Brad?!" I squeaked, my voice immediately losing its hushed tone. I rushed over to where he had fallen and knelt beside him but he didn't respond. "Brad?" I asked again. He still didn't stir.

"Oh no. Oh no," I heard Lila moan behind me.

I lifted his head in my hands, staring at his slack face, willing his eyes to open. "Brad!" Nothing. I felt like an icy hand crab claw was clamped down on my heart and I knew it wouldn't let go until Brad woke up. What was wrong with him?

"Oh no," Lila said again.

I turn my head to see her holding her arms around herself, nervously glancing between the locked door—"where the guards were still waiting outside"—and the unconscious Brad. I looked back to Brad, but his state hadn't changed.

"What's wrong with him?" I asked, eyes moving to each of my friends for answers. None of them seem to have any.

"I'm so sorry," Lila said, almost hiccupping with anxiety, "This is all my fault."

"It's okay," I told her. I wasn't particularly worried about the guards at the moment. I wanted to know what had caused Brad to drop to the floor unconscious for no apparent reason. "I'm sure we can handle the guards."

Lila bit her lip. "Na-no," she stuttered, "not them—"well, yeah the guards too—"but I meant him." She pointed a shaky finger to the passed out Brad.

I frowned, glancing between Lila and Brad—"whose head I still held in my hands.

"What are you talking about?" Fallon shot, voicing my own question, although I would have asked a little nicer. What was Lila talking about?

The words seemed to literally spill from the preteen's mouth. "When faeries feel threatened we release this gold dust," Lila explained quickly, her eyes locked on Brad.

"You should know how to keep that in check, faerie," Kye practically spat, piping up.

Kiara took his arm and whispered something in his ear. I wasn't sure exactly what she said but I did manage to catch something about being nice.

My eyes flitted between Lila's nervous expressions and Kye's hostile one. Something in my gut was telling me it wasn't a good idea to have the two of them in the same room. I didn't know what it was but ever since Lila hid behind me in the hallway when Kye first approached us, I knew I had to keep them separate.

"Faerie dust?" Tommy asked curiously, eyeing the trail of shining dust littering the floor, "I've always wondered what..."

"Tommy," I warned, "not the time."

"Right," Tommy said, shaking his head but his eyes didn't leave the Lila's faerie dust.

"What does this have to do with Brad?" Jet asked Lila.

Lila clasped her hands together, fidgeting with them as if she thought they'd do more unintentional damage. "If inhaled the dust causes people to pass out," she clarified.

"And Brad was running right behind you." My eyes widened as I realized exactly what had happened. Fearing capture again, Lila's body had somehow released the gold dust as the group followed Kiara through the halls. Brad had been bringing up the rear, and was the only person behind Lila. He must have been inhaling the dust for at least a couple minutes, and, when they reached the lab, it became too much for his body and he lost consciousness. Looking back at Brad, who looked so peaceful amongst the panic and chaos that surrounded the rest of us, I asked, "How do we wake him up?"

"It takes about an hour for the effects to wear off," Lila said, grimacing.

"Is there another way?" I asked, lifting the entire upper half of Brad's body onto my lap. There was no way we could wait an hour.

"Yeah," Fallon scoffed, "cause we don't really have time for the princess here to get his beauty rest."

I glared at her. "Not helping," I said. Fallon shrugged.

"I've never seen it work," Lila started slowly, "but supposedly a small electric shock will also wake him."

"Great, so we have to electrocute a guy who's unconscious because of some gold glitter?" Fallon asked, rolling her eyes. She then turned on Kiara and Kye, "Neither of you two happen to be able to create electricity, do you?"

"I'm a pixie," Kye stated, crossing his arms "as if we understood what that meant, but the numerous blank stares he received he either didn't catch or ignored. I had a feeling it was the latter.

Kiara shook her head, remorse painted across her face. "My powers are limited to the earth element."

Great. What were we going to do now? The gears in my head began to turn. If we somehow managed to get past the army of guards that had congregated outside the door and got back to the fake office Fallon and I had found Tommy in then we could use the electric chair hookup to wake Brad. However, although I told Lila we could take out the guards again, I lied. Even with our medley of powers I knew we didn't stand a chance against all those guards. I was sure that, this time, there were well over a hundred outside. What I didn't understand was why they hadn't knocked down the door yet. What were they waiting for?

Jet swiveled his head around the lab, scanning the work stations. "I have an idea," he said, eyeing one of them. He hurried over to an area across the room and began moving things around and opening drawers. "This'll do," I heard him mutter to himself before returning to us.

He knelt down on the other side of Brad, no doubt taking in and trying to accept the way I clung to Brad. Looking up to Tommy, Kiara and Kye, he said, "I need you three to do everything you can to make sure the guards don't come through that door."

Tommy nodded. Kye looked like he wanted to dispute the order but Kiara grabbed his arm and dragged him away from Jet.

Jet's eyes moved behind me to where I knew Lila still stood. I turned to see she had succumbed to tears. She was only one step away from hysterical. When I looked back to Jet, he was staring at me.

"I need you to get her calm," he whispered, glancing at Lila.

I stared back at him, knowing my eyes would say more than my mouth could. "But Brad—" "

Jet shook his head slightly. "We can't risk her being all worked up and releasing more faerie dust that'll make us all pass out," he said softly, "And you're the only one she seems to trust."

I looked back at Lila again. I could see that he was right "even in the past few minutes the pile of gold dust surrounding Lila's feet had doubled in size.

Fallon gently laid her hand on my shoulder. "It's okay," she told me, glancing down at Brad, "I'll take over here."

It was strange "seeing such strong compassion in Fallon's eyes "it was overpowering. I immediately knew Brad would be safe with her "that she'd never let anything happen to him.

I helped shift Brad's weight over to Fallon and Jet, who carried him over to the other side of the room, following them with my gaze until they gently laid him down on the floor. I couldn't take my eyes off

of Brad even as I walked over to comfort Lila. Whatever Jet's plan was, I hoped it worked.

"Hey," I said softly to Lila, looking down to her sobbing figure, "Look at me."

She lifted her head until our eyes locked. "Everything will be okay," I told her firmly, "We are going to get out of here, I promise. You just have to calm down."

"Iâ€"I can't," she hiccupped.

I smiled at her. "Sure you can. Just focus on something else."

Her eyes flitted over to the locked door before returning to me.

"Forget about them," I said, "Think about something else."

"Buâ€"but they're right there," she moaned, "They're going to get us."

I raised my eyebrows at her. "Really? I don't think so."

She didn't seem convinced.

"What can you do?" I prompted.

She looked confused. "Whaâ€"what can Iâ€"?"

I nodded. "If those guards were to come in here, what could you do to them?"

She pondered my question for a second, looking down at her bare feet and all the gold dust that surrounded them. Then she smiled. "I could knock them out with my faerie dust?"

My smile widened. "Can you imagine how funny it would be to see all those big, strong men suddenly drop to the floor?"

A laugh escaped her mouth. "That would be funny," she giggled.

"See?" I said, "We're going to be just fine. And, if they do come through the door I'm sure we'll all get a big laugh out of the guards passing out."

Lila nodded eagerly.

"Come on," I said, taking her hand again, "Let's go see how they're doing with Brad."

"Marina?" Lila asked, sounding slightly nervous again.

"What is it?"

"I'm really sorry about what I did to Brad," she said.

I smiled sadly at her, then pulled her against me. "It's okay," I told her, "You didn't mean to. You were scared. We all were."

We walked across the white tile to where Jet, Fallon and Brad were.

"What are you doing?" I asked them, noticing the stripped wires and piece of plastic in Brad's mouth.

Not looking up from what he was doing on the countertop, Jet said, "We cut some of the wires from this DNA analysis machine and have placed them in each of Brad's hands. I'm hoping that if we flip the power switch, the exposed wires will give him a shock big enough to wake him."

"Hoping?"

Jet glanced up at me. "Electricity is tricky," he said, "But we only stripped two of the power wires so the shock shouldn't be strong enough to really hurt him."

I nodded but, for the first time, Jet's words didn't exactly comfort me.

"Okay," Fallon said, "I'm all ready over here."

"Alright, everyone stand back," Jet said and Fallon, Lila and I all took a step back. Jet pressed the button on the machine. My eyes were on the wires exposed to Brad's skin, but I didn't see anything. Why wasn't it working? Oh god, what ifâ€¦

But my thoughts were silenced at the sound of Brad's voice.

"Ow," he said, sitting up and looking to Jet, "Man, you could have eased up a bit."

"Had to make sure the shock went through your thick head," Jet replied.

"Brad," I whispered.

I didn't think he heard me over the alarm, but his head turned in my direction. He shrugged and smiled sheepishly at me.

That was when I launched myself at him, wrapping my arms around his neck. "You're okay," I laughed, "You're awake." Even though I had my back to him, I could feel Jet's eyes on me.

He chuckled, but eagerly returned my hug. "Yeah, sorry about that. I didn't get enough sleep last night."

I laughed again, shaking my head as I pulled myself out of his arms. Despite my happiness over Brad's recovery, I couldn't help but noticed Fallon's pursed lips and longing eyes. But a second later the look was gone when the alarm turned off.

The room got eerily quiet. We had all grown accustomed to the blaring alarm, but now our ears were ringing with silence.

"Something tells me that isn't a good sign," Fallon said.

No sooner were the words out of her mouth then the door to the hall

fell forward despite Tommy, Kiara, and Kye's efforts. I stared at the impossibility of itâ€”I knew Tommy had put his invisible shield up against the door and that Kiara had literally grown five trees in front of itâ€”there was no way that door could have simply fallen into the room the way it did. From the shocked expressions on Kiara and Kye's faces, I was sure they were just as stunned as I was.

Six guards charged into the room. Jet, Fallon, Brad, Lila and I rushed to assist the three, but Tommy quickly recovered from the shock of the busted door. He bent down and scooped up a pile of Lila's faerie dust. Then, holding his hands up to the approaching guards, he moved his mouth across his hands, blowing the dust in all the guard's faces.

They stopped and one coughed as they breathed in the faerie dust. A second later the six of them were all on the floor unconscious.

"Nice, Tommy!" I told him, smiling.

I looked to see Brad frowning at the guards. Rubbing the back of his head, he said, "That hurt."

We were ready for the guard's oncoming attackâ€”confident even. I no longer cared about how many were out there. We could take them, as long as they kept trying to come through the doorway.

My confidence immediately wavered when I saw that no more guards were attempting to come into the lab. Instead, they had lined the wall in the hallway, almost standing at attention. They couldn't possibly be hoping we would come quietly, could they? Unless, they were actually going to let us goâ€”no, they definitely wouldn't do that.

Even though I was still in human form, I couldn't help but growl when the warden Fallon had knocked out earlier, appeared in the doorway. When my eyes found the newly forming bruise on the side of his head, I smiled. Fallon got him good. I wanted to shift and charge him, but I paused, trying to decide which set of jaws would be best to tear his head off. I wondered if I could turn into a dinosaur. I had never attempted it before but I liked the idea of a raptor's teeth clamping down on the warden's neck.

I took a step forward only to find that I couldn't. Frowning, I glanced around at my friendsâ€”everyone seemed to have the same problem I didâ€”we couldn't move.

"What theâ€”?" Fallon said, no doubt tugging her feet forward but failing.

I tried to move my hand but also failed. We were paralyzed from the neck down.

Crap.

Panicked, I looked back up at the warden. He was smilingâ€”of course he was smiling. I wanted to rip his head off even more.

That was when I noticed that the warden wasn't alone. Standing off of the warden's right shoulder was a young man who looked to be maybe a little older than Taz. He had brown skin and long hair. It was so

long that he had it pulled back in a ponytail. His hair was dark brown, but that was only his original hair color. The man had a dyed streak of every color of the rainbow running from the top of his head to the swinging strands of his ponytail.

The longer I stared at the man, the more I narrowed my eyes until I caught a glimpse of a purple aura. My spirits liftedâ€”this man, whatever he was, could help us.

"Hey!" I yelled to the man with the multicolored hair, "Help us!"

But the man didn't answer, he didn't even move.

The warden smiled at me. "Milos is deaf," he said as if he was praising a god, "he can't hear you, nor can he help you."

"What is he?" Brad asked, squinting at Milos to look at his aura just as I had.

Next to me, Tommy gasped, grabbing everyone's attention. "He's a genie," he whispered, as if even as the words left his mouth he still couldn't believe it.

The warden smiled at Tommy. "Very good, Thomas."

I frowned. Thomas? How did this guy know Tommy? And why did he sound like he was pleased with him for getting the right answer? My mind began to wander back to the questions I posed when we first found Tommy, like what he was doing here.

"A genie? Seriously?" Fallon asked, skeptical. It was a look I had seen on Jet's face countless times last year when we had first been introduced to other supernaturals. It was also a look I saw on him less and less as the year went onâ€”and our lives got crazier.

"Genies are extremely rare," Tommy said, his eyes still wide, "Most of the lore about them is trueâ€”except they don't live in lamps. They can grant every person three wishes. But they don't stick around for you to think of three good ones. Usually you don't even know they're there, and they'll grant whatever wish they hear. So you end up with a cancelled test or a temporarily mute sibling instead of a winning lottery ticket.

"The key to actually getting three wishes you want is to trap a genie, but, because they can evaporate into smoke at any moment, that's nearly impossible. If by some miracle you do manage to capture one you still have to be careful with what you say around them, cause they can twist anything into a wish." Tommy looked at the warden, seemingly wary. "But if he's deafâ€”then that gives you the ability to think through your three wishes."

I tilted my head to the right slightly, listening for a second. Sure enough, there was a faint scratching noise. I couldn't tell where it was coming from or what was causing it, but I wasn't imagining it.

The warden nodded to Tommy, still smiling. "Exactly. Butâ€”just as you saidâ€”we had to be very careful with what we said around Milos

here when we first captured him. It got easier once we surgically removed his eardrums."

I was horrified. This man had actually took away someone's hearing for his own benefit. "You're a monster," I hissed at him.

The scratching noise increased, but the warden didn't seem to notice it, or, if he did, he didn't care. I glanced up and immediately saw the workings of a sentence being scratched onto the ceiling. My eyes flitted over to Tommy who was muttering frantically under his breath—"his eyes glued to the ceiling above him. I quickly returned my gaze to the warden and Milos. Seeing that Milos was staring at the ceiling—"waiting to see what Tommy would wrote—"I plastered the most sincere expression of hatred on my face and directed it at the warden. I had to keep his attention.

The warden only glared at me, oblivious as to what was happening above his head. "No, my dear, that would be you," he spat. He pulled a piece of paper and pen from the pocket of his jacket. "And now, I think I'll write down my third wish to be for Milos to kill you all."

But the warden didn't even get a chance to write one letter on the paper because he disappeared. He was gone, and so were the guards that had been stationed outside. They all vanished.

"Where did he go?" Jet asked suspiciously, his eyes scanning the room as if the warden was going to suddenly pop out from behind a table.

Tommy walked over to the open doorway, stuck his head out and looked down the hallway.

The rest of us tested the boundaries of our paralysis, discovering that we were free to move on our own again.

"We're free," Brad said, "But how?"

I looked up to read what Tommy wrote on the ceiling and laughed.

Tommy stood next to Milos and smiled mischievously. "I asked Milos to lock the warden and all the guards in the prison cells," he said.

We all smiled, trying not to choke on our laughter. Even Milos smiled.

I turned to Milos, and even though I knew he couldn't hear me, I told him thank you. He seemed to understand because he nodded at me before disappearing in a puff of purple smoke.

17. Outside the Box

****Another chapter! Whew! I think I'm on a roll! ****

****Anyway, thank you times a million to everyone who reviewed. I know I've said this before, but, if you haven't reviewed please do! I would LOVE to know what your thoughts are about my story :)****

"Okay," Fallon said, "Can we _please_ get out of here now?"

No one argued with her. I certainly wasn't going to. We had already spent more time in this prison than we wanted toâ€"than we needed to.

"Finally," Kye huffed, "someone has some sense." Kiara shot him a glare but he ignored it. It occurred to me that she must really love him if she's willing to constantly put up with such a crass attitude.

The eight of us made our way to the opposite side of the lab where a door revealed (surprise, surprise!) another hallway.

"Are you sure there's roof access down here?" Jet asked Kiara, skepticism painted all over his face. He was probably feeling the same way I was: that we were trapped in an endless maze of hallways.

Kiara pointed to a door at the very end of the hall. "See that door?" she asked, not expecting an answer, "That's our way out."

We continued walking. At last. I would be able to breathe easy again once I saw the blue sky. Beside me, I felt Lila breathe a sigh of relief. I briefly wondered how long she had been a prisoner here before pushing the thought to the back of my mind. I couldn't focus on what might have happened to her while in the facility, I had to focus on how she was free now. Free to go home.

I realized with a jolt that I was too.

I could go home now. It had been weeks since I'd seen my mom, Skye and Cole; weeks since I'd seen my other friends; weeks since I had slept in my own bed. It had been weeks since I'd addressed my problems. Even in the tribeâ€"even finding out that I could shift into any animalâ€"I had been able to avoid the prophecy and my connection to it, Brad's connection to it. Brad. I had been able to avoid my tangled feelings for him and Jet.

Going home meant I would have to deal with all that. I had to fix my problems. No more running.

Because that was exactly what I'd been doing: running. I ran to Australia. Although I was taken to the tribe against my will, I had to admit I welcomed the distraction. And I had been almost too willing to help Jet break into this facility in search of his birth mother.

Jet. I stole a glance in his direction. How could I have forgotten the reason we were here to begin with? He hadn't mentioned anything about Deirdre, which could only mean one thing: whatever he'd discovered (if anything) wasn't good. I wanted to ask him about it, but decided against it. I didn't want to confront him with everyone else around. I hoped I would get the chance to pull him aside later on and talk about it.

In fact, I had a lot to talk about with Jet. But all that had to wait.

Just then, a feeling hit me. It was one of the strangest feelings I had ever felt. There was nothing like itâ€|except, maybeâ€|the feeling of dÃ©jÃ vu.

That was it. DÃ©jÃ vu. I quickly realized that anything I had thought to be dÃ©jÃ vu before wasn't. It wasn't nearly as strong as this feeling. This was intense, overpowering, and yet, unclear. It was like anytime I tried to get a handle on the feeling it would squirm its way out of my grasp.

As with dÃ©jÃ vu, I felt like I had been here, in this moment, beforeâ€|that whatever I was about to doâ€|I had already done it, which wasn't possible because I had never been down this hallway before. It didn't make any sense.

The more I tried to understand what I was feeling the more the ache in my head grew. Holding a hand to my head, I stopped walking, leaning against the wall a bit.

"Marina?" I heard Jet's voice, laced with worry, reach out to me. I clung to the sound, desperately trying to pull back from the dÃ©jÃ vu. "Are you okay?"

I closed my eyes and Jet took hold of my hand. Taking a deep breath in, I squeezed his hand.

"Brad?" Fallon asked, worry also pinging in her tone.

I opened my eyes, to find Jet's green ones watching me cautiously. I smiled at him. "I'm okay."

I looked over to Brad who was also slumped against the wall. He was staring at me, a bead of sweat trickling down the side of his face.

"You felt it too?" he asked me, more as a confirmation of something he already knew rather than a direct question.

I nodded. I glanced around, but no one else seemed to be recovering from such a strain on their mind. My eyes wandered around the all until they locked on the door behind the groupâ€|the door that Kiara had said would allow access to the roof. Whatever was responsible for that intense feeling of dÃ©jÃ vu, it was behind that door.

I straightened up, allowing Jet to help me. It wasn't that I was still weak. Thankfully, the feeling had passed. But the concern on his face was deep that I didn't have the heart to tell I didn't need his support anymoreâ€|or maybe I just wanted to relish in the feeling of his hand in mine a few moments longer.

I looked back to Brad who was also eyeing the closed door behind the group. "We have to go in there," I said, although I was sure he already knew this. In fact, everyone knew this, but they didn't know there was now a new reason why.

"Umm, duh," Fallon said, as if to prove my point. She was frowningâ€|she clearly thought we had gone insane. No one but Brad and I understood that somethingâ€|or someoneâ€|important was behind that door.

Kiara tried the door. "It's locked."

Stretching his arms high over his head, Tommy stepped forward. "Not a problem," he said. Once again, he began talking in Latin, holding his hand over the doorknob. A few seconds later there was a distinctive _click_ and Tommy turned the knob.

We all walked into the alcove, Brad and I more cautiously than the others. Directly ahead of us was a set of stairs, but to the left was another door and a giant glass window. But it wasn't an ordinary glass window—it was slightly darker, almost as if there were two panes—and that was when I realized it was a two-way mirror.

Almost as if we were drawn to the window, Brad and I found ourselves standing in front of it, staring into a small, square room. It looked like the facility's form of an interrogation room. Inside stood a girl who looked to be about our age, maybe slightly younger, but I was only basing that assumption on her height—she was shorter than both Fallon and I. She had shoulder length, curly dark hair, and was leaning against the brick wall that imprisoned her.

I wasn't sure why, but I got the sense she was waiting for someone.

Before I could consider that thought further, she spoke up. "There you are!" she exclaimed.

Brad and I exchanged looks, confused as to how she could see us. Although, I supposed the room wasn't necessarily sound proof. The rest of our group crept forward, curiosity getting the best of them.

"I was beginning to wonder if you guys would ever show up," she laughed as if she was making a joke. No one else laughed with her—further looks of confusion were exchanged. The girl continued, "For a second I even thought that maybe the future had changed and you guys took a different route."

I glanced around at my friends—every single one of them was staring through the mirror at the girl as if she's crazy.

I turned to the door beside the mirror and tried to open it, but, of course, like every other door in this facility, it was locked.

"Uh, Marina?" Fallon said hesistantly, "We're kind of in the middle of an escape here. We don't have time to stop and smell the roses."

"She's a prisoner," I told her—and everyone else for that matter, "We have to help her."

Tommy, Jet and Fallon exchanged looks. I didn't like what their looks said.

"Marina," Jet said slowly, "If she's a prisoner then why isn't she in one of the cells?"

"How should I know?" I said, "Maybe she had information they wanted so they took her here to interrogate her."

"If it was information they wanted they wouldn't have taken her here," Tommy said softly, "They would have tortured her."

Everyone was silent as Tommy's words sunk in. What he said might have been true but it didn't matter.

"So they wanted her for something else." I shrugged. "Will you please just help me get her out?" I tugged on the door again, but it didn't budge.

"Marina, listen to me," Jet said, resting a hand on my shoulder, "She could be dangerous."

"Or she could be one of the guards here," Fallon pointed out, "Tommy did ask that genie guy to put all the guards in prison cells. Maybe he ran out of cells."

"She's not dangerous and she's not a guard," Brad said.

"And how do you know this?" Fallon demanded, placing her hands on his hips.

Brad shrugged.

"We just do," I said. This girl was the reason for our intense déjà vu feeling out in the hall, but I knew she wasn't dangerous.

"Sorry," Fallon said, not sounding sorry at all, "but that's not good enough."

"Why are you guys evening debating this?" Kye demanded, "The exit is _right there_! Let's go!"

I marched over to him and stuck my head in his face, getting as close as I dared before I was afraid he'd punch me. "That girl has probably been tortured in here, just like the rest of you, and you just want me to leave her here?"

For a second I thought Kye really was going to punch me. But then he took a step back, shaking with anger and frustration. He threw his hands in the air. "Of all the people to get stuck with," he muttered, "We had to get a freakin' martyr."

"Kyeâ€|" Kiara said warningly but Kye ignored her.

"No," he told her, "This is where I draw the line. Are you coming, Kiara? They want to stay? Fine, they can have a nice life in prison." He turned and stalked off up the stairs.

Kiara glanced between us and Kye, before smiling apologetically at me. "Sorry, but I can't stay here any longer."

I nodded in understanding. "It's okay."

"Thank you for helping," she said.

"Helping?!" Kye called from the top, "They didn't do anything helpful!"

"_Sorry_ about him too," she laughed before turning and following Kye up the staircase, disappearing out of sight.

Once they were gone, Jet looked between me and Brad. "At least check her for an aura, before you do anything," he said, his eyes pleading with me.

I didn't understand why he was so worried. I knew for a fact that this girl wasn't dangerous. Why couldn't they see it too?

"Or stand aside so one of us can," Tommy said, stepping towards me.

I moved to my right slightly, shifting closer to Brad. He seemed to be my only ally when it came to this girl.

Tommy watched the girl on the other side of the mirror, his eyes narrowing. For the hell of it, I decided to do the same. I immediately picked up an aura around the girl—a white aura. Like most auras, I had no idea what that meant, but, if anything I was further convinced she wasn't dangerous. I mean, white usually meant innocence, right?

"Okay," Tommy said beside me, "Let's get her out."

Fallon raised her eyebrows at him. "Umm, care to clue us in on what's behind door number three, genius?"

"She's a seer," Tommy said, as if that was explanation enough, "Completely harmless." He moved to the door, and, holding his hand over the knob like before, began whispering in Latin.

Only this time, nothing happened. There was no _click_ and the knob didn't turn.

Tommy frowned, snatching his hand away from the doorknob as if it shocked him. "The door's been guarded against spells," he said.

"How is that possible?" Jet asked, posing the question to everyone but no one answered. He turned on Brad, as if this was his fault. "I thought this place was run by shapeshifter hunters."

Brad raised his hands in a sign of surrender. "It's supposed to be. How did the warden manage to capture a genie?" Brad asked, his voice rising, "I'm as much in the dark about all this as you are."

Both Jet and Brad narrowed their eyes at each other.

Sensing a fight, I marched between them. "Stop it!" I yelled at them, "Go stand by the stairs and turn around. You too, Tommy."

They looked like they were going question what I was doing but I managed to get words out of my mouth faster.

"Fallon, take my clothes," I said, then turning to the mirror, yelled, "Back away from the door!" I could only hope that the girl heard me. Then pointing a finger and glaring at Fallon, I said, "And I don't want to hear one peep out of you." Her only response was to raise her eyebrows.

Making sure the boys weren't looking, I undressed and shifted into a gorilla. The weight of my arms, startled me at first, but then I got my bearings. Definitely not the most graceful of animals, but, then again, I wasn't looking for graceful.

Scrunching my large hands into fists, I pounded them against the glass of the mirror until it shattered into thousands of pieces. I shifted back into human form and turned to take my dress back from Fallon. Only the sound of breaking glass had caused all three boys to turn. Whether or not they saw me as a gorilla I didn't know, but I did know they had seen me naked. Tommyâ€”the good guy that he isâ€”quickly averted his eyes. Jet and Brad on the other handâ€”well, let's just say they were enjoying the view.

Scowling, I pulled the dress over my head. Once I was clothed again, Jet and Brad looked away sheepishly, realizing they had been staring. They better damn well feel ashamed, I thought grudgingly as I turned to the now open hole.

"Thanks, Marina," the girl said, tiptoeing around the broken glass inside the small room.

How did she know my name?

Tommy rushed forward to help her through the hole. She willingly took his hand and carefully lifted a leg over to our side before hopping over the ledge.

"Gosh, for a second there I thought you guys might actually leave me there." She chuckled. "I'm just kidding. I knew you'd let me out."

Brad, Jet, Fallon, Tommy and I all exchanged a look. It said, "who the hell is his girl and what is she talking about?" We were all frowningâ€”except for Lila, who just looked scared again.

"Uhh, right," Brad said, then gesturing to the stairs, "Shall we?"

Fallon nodded fervently, following him up the stairs. The rest of continued behind them. There were only two sets of stairs we had to climb before we reached the door to the roof. Brad pushed it open and we were immediately hit with a warm, Arizona breeze. Despite the heaviness of the air, I took a deep breath in. Finally. We were out.

We walked over to the edge and looked down. It wasn't a particularly long way down, but it was long enough to break a bone if we jumped. Below I spotted Brad's black Chargerâ€”a car I was starting to see as our getaway vehicle.

"Marina?" Lila asked nervously.

I looked over to her. "Yeah? You okay?" I asked. She seemed infinitely happier now that we were outsideâ€”it was almost as if she was literally glowing with joyâ€”and yet she was definitely still worried about something.

She nodded. "I was just wondering what you were planning on doing now."

Oh. Of course Lila would want to come with us. I wondered where she lived. We would have to take her home before heading back to California. "Well, I guess we're going to have to all cram into Brad's car down there."

She glanced down at the carâ€"she didn't look too happy anymore. But, then again, _I_ wasn't exactly happy about squeezing seven people into a car that seated fiveâ€"that was assuming that seer-girl was coming with usâ€"she hadn't said anything about it but she seemed to think so.

"On second thought, I think I'll stick to my own way of travel," Lila said, then she smiled up at me, "Thank you, Marina." She ran forward and hugged me. It took me by surprise at first but, after a second or two, I wrapped my arms around her, returning the hug.

Lila took a step back. I watched as a set of purely gold wings unfurled from her back. The sight was truly amazing. If I didn't know any better I would have thought she was an angel.

She shot me one last smile before her wings began to flutter and she soared into the air, flying away.

Fallon walked up beside me, staring at Lila. "I have to admit," she said, "I wasn't expecting that."

"Which part?" Brad asked, moving to stand on my other side, also watching as the young faerie grew smaller and smaller. I heard three more pairs of feet walk over to us.

Fallon didn't answer right away. After a moment, her mouth turned up in a smile. "All of it."

18. Choices

****Thank you for all the reviews and a special thank you to those who hadn't reviewed before. It was great hearing from you! Please continue to let me know what you think. :)****

****Now, onto the next chapter! Also, please don't hate meâ€|.****

We were out. Now we just had to tackle the problem of getting off the roof in one piece.

A problem that turned out to not be as much of a problem as I anticipated. We had no rope or parachute to allow us to get down to the ground. The only equipment Brad had bothered to bring was his gun and extra ammo. But that didn't matter, because, as Fallon joyfully pointed out, we had me.

So I ended up shuttling people to the ground in my dragon form, which, wasn't the easiest thing in the world. I was still having trouble flying, let alone flying while carrying someone, so, to get down, I simply used my wings as a parachute and glided to the ground. The landing was the hardest part. I had to make sure I got my feet securely on the floor, as well as the person's I was carrying, while making sure I wouldn't fall forward on top of the person. And then, on top of that, I had to actually fly back up to the roof to get the

next person. Needless to say, I was exhausted by the time Jet and I safely landed on the ground.

Shifting back, I turned to the seer-girl, "Are you coming with us?"

She glanced between me and Brad. "For now," she said, "I'm Eloise, by the way."

I smiled politely at her. "Marina."

"I know."

Yeah, I had already realized that. What I wanted to know was how did she know.

We all made our way over to Brad's car. I was beginning to realize just how compact it was. Even though we didn't have Lila with us, we still had six people and five seats.

Brad unlocked the car and opened the driver's side door. Jet opened the passenger and motioned for me to get inside, offering me more room in front. I frowned at him. That didn't make senseâ€"Jet and Brad were the guys and bigger than Fallon, Eloise and me. Of course, Tommy was a guy too, but he had always been on the leaner side. Both Jet and Brad had a significant amount of muscle on their upper bodiesâ€"muscle that would make things squishier than necessary if one of them were to sit in the back.

That was why Tommy, Fallon, Eloise, and I piled in the back of Brad's Charger, Fallon half sitting on my lap. It certainly wasn't going to be the most comfortable of rides.

Everyone was silent. I was sure that they were all thinking about what had happened in the facility like I was. I tried not to think about it, but there were so many things that didn't make sense. The most obvious being the fact that the hunters were imprisoning supernaturals other than shapeshifters. According to Brad, they weren't even supposed to know about other supernaturals. Someone had lied. Either Brad was lied to directly by his parents, or Brad's whole family had been lied to by someone higher up. The question was why?

After about an hour, Brad spotted a gas station with a small convenience store on our right. He pulled off the road and was about to park in one of the two spots outside the store when Eloise started yelling at him.

"Get back on the road!" she shouted in his ear (well, everyone's ear), "Quick! There are guards here!"

Wincing Brad said, "How do you know?"

"I just had a vision, of course!" she yelled, not lowering her voice.

Brad pressed down on the gas and pulled back out onto the road. I had a feeling he didn't do it because he believed Eloise, but to get her to stop shouting.

I turned around in my seat, watching the gas station. Sure enough, two seconds after we were back on the road, a man and a woman, both dressed in the same uniform the guards from the facility wore, stepped out of the convenience store.

We didn't try to stop again until we crossed back into Utah. After what happened back at the first gas station, Brad insisted on taking only back roads, and a route that wasn't the direct one. While I understood why he was doing it, I couldn't help but think how it meant we would be spending more time in the car.

Normally, I wouldn't have minded spending so much time in the car, even squished the way we were, but I had to spend that time with Eloise. Once she warned us about the guards in the convenience store she didn't shut up. But it wasn't mindless babble that came out of her mouthâ€”oh noâ€”it was much worse.

She talked about me.

And Brad, and Jet, but I was definitely her favorite subject.

"So, Marina," she asked, "Have you made a decision yet?"

"A decision?" I repeated, still wondering how she knew my name.

"Yeah, have you decided who you want as your boyfriend? Jet or Brad?"

My eyes widened at her. I was sure both Jet and Brad's eyes had widened in the front.

She shook her head. "Oh, how silly of me," she said, "I'm sorry. You haven't picked one yet. I got my days mixed up."

It was too much. "How do you know our names? And how do you know I need to choose between Jet and Brad?"

Eloise looked at me like I was missing something obvious. "I'm a seer," she said, "I've been seeing glimpses of your future for a long time now."

"Why me?"

She shrugged. "You're my subject."

Great.

When I didn't say anything, Eloise kept talkingâ€”and didn't stop.

"Personally, I think they're both amazing guys," she continued, "I understand why you're having a hard time choosing."

I wanted to bury my head in the ground, or at least stick my head out the window. Didn't she understand that Jet and Brad were sitting right up front and could hear every word she was saying?

"They're both good kissers," Eloise said, as if she was remembering from experience.

Up front, Brad tensed while Jet turned his head ever so slightly to look at Eloise, clearly wondering whether or not she was actually saying what she was.

"When you and Jet kiss, it's like you fit together perfectly," she elaborated, "But, oh, when you and Brad kissed, it was so romantic."

I could feel my cheeks turn red in embarrassment at her comment. I didn't think Jet knew Brad and I had kissed, and I hadn't exactly planned on telling him. Of course, Tommy didn't know any of this, and probably wasn't enjoying the in depth look into my love life. Fallon, on the other hand, seemed to enjoying herself immensely, even if it was only for everyone's discomfort.

"And then there's looksâ€"not to sound superficial," Eloise said enthusiastically, "â€"but those can be important too."

"They're both extremely hot. I would even go as far as to say that they're drop-dead-gorgeous. But of course you already know this. I know you've seen Jet naked but not Brad."

Naked? Did she really have no filter?

"And they've both seen you nakedâ€"more than onceâ€"if I remember correctly," she said, then leaned in closer to me, but didn't make an effort to lower her voice, "I'm not sure if you realize this, but they're both really turned on by the sight of you naked."

Nope. Definitely no filter there.

This time I actually buried my face in Fallon's back. I wasn't sure how much more I could take.

Eloise went on for the next two hours.

It was getting dark when we passed a sign that said "Nevada Welcomes You." Jet suggested we stop at a motel for the night, but Eloise insisted otherwise, claiming that we would be caught if we stayed in any kind of hotel or motel. While we all rolled our eyes when she said this, we weren't taking any chances after what happened back at the gas station in Arizona.

I resolved not to say anything thoughâ€"I was still mortified from Eloise's insight into my love life.

It occurred to me that Eloise could know who I actually ended up picking. She had mentioned something about me picking and getting her days mixed up. Did that mean she had seen me choose either Jet or Brad? I was tempted to ask her, but, at the same time a part of me considered that cheating. If Eloise told me which guy I chose in the future, was it really my decision? Or was I just basing my decision off of who she told me I pick? Or maybe if she told me I'd feel compelled to pick the opposite. But then would I be making the wrong choice? The whole concept just confused me. The future was just too complicated for me, which was probably one of the reasons why I had yet to figure out the prophecy.

"What about the side of the road?" Brad asked.

"Oh yes," Eloise said, "We'll be perfectly safe there."

Great. So not only were we going to have to sleep on the ground but we were also going to have to sleep without a roof over our heads.

Conveniently, Brad had three sleeping bags and four blankets in the trunk of his car along with all his guns and hunting equipment. We set up camp a little ways from the road, just far enough into the brush that if anyone did happen to go down our deserted little back road their lights wouldn't catch sight of Brad's car.

Desperate to escape Eloise's company, I followed Brad further into the desert to collect twigs and stuff to make a fire. Breaking branches from the brush, I collected as much as I could in my arms.

"I just don't get it," Brad said suddenly.

"Don't get what?"

"The hunters." He was frowning at his pile of twigs. It was then I realized how few he had. "They shouldn't have known about those other supernaturals, let alone how to capture them."

"I know." I had been thinking the same thing, but judging by the look on his face, not as much as Brad had.

"Someone must have told them," he said, "I mean, I didn't even know you guys were called shapeshifters until I met you."

I nodded. When we first met he only knew shapeshifters as animals or monsters.

"I should have known about it."

"You couldn't haveâ€" I started but Brad kept talking.

"I should have known that the compound had other supernaturals in it," he said, "I'm the hunter. It's my job to stay one step ahead of the other hunters so you guys don't get hurt." He hung his head. "You couldn't have gotten seriously hurt in there, Marina. You could have gotten killed."

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "You can't blame yourself," I told him, "Someone has clearly gone behind the other hunters' backs. It's not your fault that this information was kept from you."

"Maybe," he said resignedly, "But I'm going to find out what's really going on."

We headed back to the others after that. I agreed with Bradâ€"we needed to figure out what was going on with the huntersâ€"and why Brad's family didn't know about it. I hoped that perhaps some of those answers would come once we got home.

Jet started walking towards me before I even reached the spot where Fallon had set up our make-shift beds. After shooting a glare in Brad's direction, he jerked his head back away from the rest of the

group, asking me to walk with him. I set down my pieces for the fire and followed him out further out into the desert.

He shoved his hands in his pockets as we walked in silence for a minute. Finally, he spoke up, "What were you talking with Brad about?"

I frowned. That wasn't the question I had been expecting. "We talked about what happened in the prison," I answered truthfully.

"Oh." Jet nodded, but he clearly had something else on his mind.

Eloise's monologue from the car sprouted in my head. I really hoped he wasn't about to bring that up.

"That was it?" he asked.

"Yeah, why?" I frowned again.

"Nothing, he just seemed upset," Jet said, "I wanted to make sure you were okay. I wanted to make sure he didn't hurt you."

I looked up at him. He thoughtâ€"he thought Brad had hurt me? "I'm fine. You know Brad would never do anything to me."

"I didn't mean it that way," he said, "I can't help but be protective of you, Marina. It's like an instinct I can't ignore."

"You don't have to worry about me with I'm with Brad," I told him.

"But I do." He ran a hand through his hair. "I can't help itâ€"I see you with himâ€"I see him touch you and I want to rip his hand from his body."

I had a feeling I knew where this conversation was going. "Jet, lookâ€" "

"I'm jealous, Marina."

Neither of us said anything for awhile. After a few minutes, I glanced up at him. He seemed to not want to talk about Brad anymore, and frankly, neither did I. Daring to change the subject, I spoke up. "Umm, I wanted to ask youâ€" | "

He raised his eyes to look at me.

"â€" | if you found anything on your mom."

He looked away again, instead focusing his eyes on the setting sun. "She wasn't there."

I sighed. "Well, we always knew it was a long shotâ€" "

"She _was_ thereâ€" | ten years ago."

My eyes widened in surprise. "Soâ€" | so she escaped?"

Jet shook his head and closed his eyes. "She was a prisoner there for

four years before..." His voice was barely over a whisper. "They took her in to experiment on. Halfway through their procedure, she died."

I immediately pulled him to me, wrapping my arms around him. He held me, resting his head on my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Jet," I whispered.

We stayed like that for several minutes. I didn't care if anyone saw us. Jet needed this, he needed me.

Finally, he stepped back, wiping a tear from his eye. Looking back at the horizon, where the sun had disappeared, he said, "I think the worst part is knowing that there was nothing I could do to save her. I didn't even know I was a shapeshifter at the time. I was only seven."

We just stood there, watching the sky until it was completely dark, before returning to the others. No one said anything when we approached, even though I was sure they had seen us. Jet and I settled around the fire—"of course I would end up between Jet and Brad.

"I think we should take shifts," Brad said, "Tommy, John, and I."

Both Tommy and Jet nodded.

"Shifts for what?" Fallon asked, looking between the three boys.

"Lookout," Brad clarified, "and to keep the fire going. It's not quite spring yet so it's probably going to get cold."

Our dinner consisted of things we picked up at the convenience store Eloise deemed safe. It wasn't the most nutritious, but it silenced our growling stomachs.

I knew I had been avoiding Eloise ever since we stopped, and I don't think anyone blamed me after what happened in the car. But, at the same time, I knew had to talk to her. Not only was she a seer but she was also a seer who seemed to be focused in on my life—"she had to know something about the prophecy.

I settled down on the ground beside her, but before I could even get a word out she stopped me.

"I can't tell you what the prophecy means, Marina," she said.

I frowned. "So you know it? The Porias Prophecy?"

She laughed. "Of course I know it. It's more important than you know."

"So why can't you help me?" I was growing frustrated, but, then again, the prophecy always frustrated me. Brad, Jet, Fallon, and Tommy all leaned in to better hear out conversation. None of them knew exactly what the prophecy said. I probably should have told them—"especially Brad since the only thing I knew for sure about it was that it involved him.

"You and Brad need to figure it out together."

"Why me?" Brad asked immediately, "What does this have to do with me?"

Eloise looked between me and Brad. "You haven't told him?" she asked, astonished, "But I know you know it involves him. For goodness sake! Why do you think you both felt my presence back in that hallway? I get visions of you _and_ Brad, not just you, Marina!"

"That déjà vu feeling?" I asked.

"You get visions of my future?" Brad asked at the same time. He sounded slightly petrified by the thought of that..

Eloise smiled, clearly enjoying our confusion. "I guess I'll just have to fill everyone in—but then again I knew I would." She folded her hands in her lap. "To answer Marina's question: yes, sometimes when a person first comes in contact with a seer who has had visions of them the person can experience déjà vu. It is because the seer has seen the person's actions as a part of the future which may have become the past or present to the person it often feels like déjà vu."

I would be lying if I said her explanation cleared the confusion in my head.

"To answer Brad's question: while the Porias Prophecy speaks of 'one of many forms', aka Marina, it also talks about a 'brother descendent.' As the story goes, all shapeshifters are descended from Luka and all hunters are descended from Roe. Since Luka and Roe were brother and sister," Eloise pointed to Brad, "that makes you her brother descendent."

I interrupted her. "That's why you see both of us in your visions?"

Eloise shook her head. "Let me see—how can I explain this without giving anything away?" she asked herself. "It's rather complicated—Okay, there are three different types of seers: ones that sees the future of humans, ones that sees the future of supernaturals, and ones that see the future of other seers. Within those three types there are some seers—like me—who see the future of only certain individuals. Usually, when that happens, the individuals the seer sees are the subjects of an important spoken prophecy."

"Whenever I get a vision I am either seeing it from your eyes, Marina, or from Brad's. With the help of other seers, I discovered that you were both part of the Porias Prophecy."

We all soaked in the new information for Eloise. But after a few minutes, I couldn't take it. "But what's the point of seeing our future if you can't tell us about it? Or even tell us what the prophecy means?"

"Because I can't change the future," Eloise stated, "I can only do my best to guide you. Every decision you make must be your own."

Even though she had a point, I couldn't help but feel that Eloise was getting more annoying by the second.

"Fine," Brad said, "But what exactly does this prophecy say?" Even though the question was directed at Eloise, his eyes were on me when he asked it.

I sighed then recited the words that had been haunting me for months. "When red tints Roe, the war of light will begin. Those of the rainbow will be the first plagued. Magus will bare them and fill the dark with fear. But one of many forms will ascend and change the course of fate for a brother Descendant. Together, the one will lead, embracing light to fight. Only one can join the sun at dawn." Everyone was silent as I finished.

"So we're going to fight a war against each other?" Brad asked, breaking the silence.

"What?" I exclaimed, "No! What gave you that idea?"

Brad looked at me gravely. "Well, it mentions the course of my fate being changed and something about only one living to see the sunrise."

I ran through the prophecy in my head again. He was right, but that didn't mean we would be against each other, did it? It could be talking about someone else at the end. It had to be referring to someone else.

"You're not going to fight each other," Jet said, butting in, "The prophecy said you'll fight together."

Brad looked wary. "I hope you're right," he said, "But what about the rest of it? What does it mean?"

For the next hour we debated meanings of the prophecy, not really coming up with anything substantial. We kept pestering Eloise to tell us if we were in the right direction but, for once, she kept her mouth shut.

"We're getting nowhere," Fallon said finally, "I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

We all agreed with her. Sleep sounded awfully inviting—the only problem now was that I couldn't stop thinking about the prophecy.

"I'll take the first shift," Brad said, then turning to Jet added, "I'll wake you are three hours."

Jet nodded before lying down on one of the blankets. I took a sleeping bag between Fallon and Eloise—not wanting to cause any more bed issues.

I laid there thinking about the prophecy and the prison and the tribe. I thought about Brad and I thought about Jet. I even thought about Tommy—we still hadn't learned why or how he was taken to the prison. I wasn't sure how long I laid awake, but when Eloise's snores escalated to that of a snorting pig, I figured sleep wasn't going to come to me anytime soon.

I slid out of the sleeping bag and went over to sit with Brad on the back of his car.

He watched me as I climbed up next to him. "What are you doing up?" he asked.

"Couldn't sleep."

He glanced back at our friends asleep around the fire. "I'm surprised Fallon hasn't suffocated Eloise with a pillow or something yet," he laughed.

I smiled. "Fallon sleeps with earplugs in," I told him, "otherwise Eloise would definitely be dead by now."

We both laughed, so hard our bodies shook the car. When our laughter finally died down, Brad looked over to me.

"Why didn't you tell me about the prophecy?" he asked.

I looked away. I should have told him, I knew that. "I was scared," I admitted, "I have no clue what it means so I tried to ignore it, pretend it didn't exist."

He sighed. "You should have trusted me," he said, "I can help you. You're not in this alone."

"I know."

He turned towards me. His blonde hair stood out in the moonlight. "I care about you. I would never let anything hurt you," he said seriously, "I love you, Marina."

I turned my head to look at his face, but I didn't have to look at him to know he was being sincere. "I know."

The corner of his lips turned up in a half smile. "That's not exactly the response I was hoping for."

I opened my mouth but he put his finger over my lips, silencing me.

"No, let me guessâ€¦I know?"

I smiled under his finger. He lowered his hand, allowing me to speak.

"I do love you, Brad," I told him, "but I love Jet too." I couldn't look him in the eye when I finished my sentence. He didn't say anythingâ€¦we were both silent for a minute.

"Let me kiss you," he said suddenly.

My head snapped up. "Whaâ€¦what?"

He gave a sharp nod. "Let me kiss you," he repeated. He looked determinedâ€¦as if kissing me would solve everything.

I was skeptical. Us kissing in the first place was one of the reasons

my love life was in shambles.

His expression softened. "Please." His crystal blue eyes pleaded with me.

I felt my head move up and down very slowly.

Brad leaned in closer to me, placing a hand behind each ear, working his fingers into my tangled hair. He guided my head towards his, tilting it so our lips could meet. When his lips touched mine I could tell he was hesitant—it was only the lightest feel of skin. But then a desire took over and the kiss became firmer, more intense. Soon, I found that he wasn't just kissing me but I was kissing him back. I moved my mouth over his, savoring the taste and feel that was every bit him while also feeling his hunger for every bit of me.

But just as my heart was telling me to go for it, my mind flashed me an image of Jet. I quickly broke away from Brad and jumped off the car, knowing I was leaving him hanging. I had to get away—I had to sort things through. I turned my back to Brad only to find myself face to face with Jet.

Had he seen me and Brad kissing?

Jet stared at me with accusing eyes, his jaw clenched.

Oh yes, he definitely saw.

19. Good Riddance

****Thank you thank you thank you for all the awesome reviews! And today, I have to give an extra thanks to the guests who keep leaving those long, thoughtful ones—I love reading them!****

****And now the moment you've all been waiting for—I hope everyone LOVES this chapter! I know I do—I seriously couldn't stop smiling while writing it ;) ****

Jet didn't say anything to me. His eyes still blazing with anger, he turned and marched off towards the road.

I glanced back at Brad—I really shouldn't leave him like this—he deserved an explanation. But I couldn't let Jet run off either. In a split second, I made my decision and took off after Jet.

"Jet!" I yelled into the night, but he didn't turn around, instead he picked up his pace. "Jet!" I yelled again. He still didn't answer me. At this point I had to jog to keep up with him. "Jet!"

I watched as he lifted his t-shirt over his head and tossed it on the side of the road. He was going to shift and then really run off. Technically, I could follow him, but I knew he wouldn't want me to.

I dug my toes into the dirt. "Damn you," I said more to myself than to him.

But my words made him stop. He slowly turned back to me, his eyes narrowed. "What did you say?" he asked.

I paused; taken aback not only by the fact that he had heard me but that he'd even bothered to turn around. I looked up at him, and, staring right into his green eyes, shouted, "Damn you!"

He raised his eyebrows. "Damn me?" he asked as if he'd heard me correctly.

"Yes, that's right! Damn you!" I was still shouting but I didn't care if anyone heard me anymore. "What do you want me to say, Jet?"

He stared at me, eyes remaining slits of anger.

"I know you saw me and Brad kissing. You want me to tell you that I liked it?" I balled my hands into fists. I was going to lose it any second, I could feel it. Pressure seemed to be building up all over my body, but mostly in my throat and behind my eyes. "Is that what you want to hear?!"

"So that's it then?" he asked, waving his hand in the air dismissively, "You've picked him? That's how you really feel?"

"Why don't you ask me?" A single tear broke through the barrier and leaked out onto my cheek.

"What?"

I didn't answer right away but when I finally got the courage to speak, my voice was only a whisper. "Ask me how I really feel."

He frowned at my request, clearly confused as to where I was going with it, but he asked me anyway. "How do you really feel?"

I smiled sadly at him. "Confused," I admitted, "I care about you and Brad, and I don't want to lose either of you. My mind goes one way and my heart goes another, and then they flip flop. I don't know which to trust." I felt my feet inch closer to him.

"If it involves love shouldn't you go with your heart?" he asked, going along with my rant.

"That's what I thought at first. But see I've learned that love isn't the only emotion that resides in my heart. So I had to put my heart, and my mind aside—after all logic really should have no place in this.

"I have to go with my gut. I have to choose based on what I want, based on what my body wants. I've noticed that there's one person I always look to—that I always gravitate towards. While I love you both, there is only one person I need to be with." My feet took two more steps closer to him.

Jet sighed and looked down at the pavement. "You need him," he said, "You two are connected by the prophecy."

I laughed, shaking my head.

He looked up at me, surprised by my sudden mood swing.

"Yes, we're connected, but I don't care about that. Screw the

prophecy," I said, still smiling, "I need _you,_ Jet."

Before I could even get another word out, the few steps that had been between us were filled, and I was lifted off my feet. Jet's lips were on mine and I didn't hesitate to kiss him back. I wound my arms around the back of his neck and wrapped my legs around his waist as he held me off the ground. The pressure I felt building up only a few moments was released in a fury of passion.

It had been _way_ too long since I'd kissed Jet.

Everything about him was familiarâ€"it was like returning to your favorite vacation spot after years of absence to find that nothing has changed. Every emotion he'd held back since that day in the hospital came seeping through in one kiss: his desire, his pain, his fervor, but most of all, his love. I always knew he loved me, but I had never felt his love like this. Just as I needed him, I could feel his need for me.

Our lips parted and we both took quick breaths in. He pressed his forward to mine as he slowly set me back down. I didn't move my arms from his neck, while he snaked his around my hips.

"I love you," he whispered.

I opened my eyes to find his beautiful green eyes watching meâ€"eyes that always seemed to find their way into my dreamsâ€"waking and sleeping. "I love you too," I whispered back, unable to stop the corners of my mouth from turning up in a smileâ€"but why would I want to stop myself from smiling anyway? Everything about this moment was perfect. I didn't want it to end.

I pulled his head back down to me. Tracing his lips with my own, I memorized every curve before digging deeper. He parted his lips and my tongue took the chance to explore his mouth. Our tongues entwined as our lips grappled for more.

One of my hands slid down from his neck, over his shoulder to his bare chest, but I didn't get to keep it there very long. He pulled me closer to himâ€"pressing my body firmly to hisâ€"a hand smoothing the fabric covering my back. With one arm tightly around his neck and the other resting on the skin of his shoulder, he pulled me closer still so that every curve or crevice of my body was filled by a part of his. A hand moved up my back and slithered beneath a strap of my dress, sneakily caressing the skin there until the strap slipped from my shoulder. He moved his lips off of mine, leaving a trail of kisses and blazing breath from my mouth, down my neck, and to my collarbone, sending smoldering shivers skating down my back and limbs.

He pulled his lips from my skin. I didn't want him to stopâ€"and I didn't think he did either.

Slowly letting a breath out, he warmed the flesh there even though it already felt like it was on fire from his kisses. He lifted his head up, and removed a hand from my back, carefully placing the strap of my dress back on my shoulder.

Meeting my wistful eyes, he ran his fingers through the edge of my hair. "You're so beautiful," he said, his voice husky.

I gave him a dubious look. "I'm basically wearing rags."

He chuckled and his eyes twinkled with that same laughter. "My little Cinderella then."

I rolled my eyes but laughed too.

The roar of an engine dampened my state of euphoria. Brad. How could I have forgotten about him? He had probably been watching Jet and I the whole time. My cheeks heartened in embarrassment as I turned to see Brad's black Charger pull back onto the road. I started to walk towards his car but he pressed down on the gas and sped away from me, not even sparing me a glance.

Crap.

Why hadn't I considered what Brad would do if he saw me and Jet? Oh right. Because when I'm kissing Jet I can't think of anything but him. Normally I loved that about him, but now wasn't one of those timesâ€"it had possibly cost me my allyâ€"an ally that, according to the prophecy, I would need. Was this what the prophecy was talking about? Had Brad been right when he said we would fight against each other? Would this be how one of my best friends turns into my enemy?

A hand came to rest on my shoulderâ€"Jet's hand. "Don't worry," he said, reading my mind, "He'll be back."

"How do you know?"

"Because he needs to blow off some steam. He knows he just lost you, give him some time to himself."

I nodded but I couldn't help but think of the prophecy. Jet said the prophecy should be interpreted as Brad and I working together, and I wanted to believe himâ€"I really didâ€"but I was finding it hard to do.

"He knew this was only going to turn out one of two ways. Either he would get you or I would, and I won," Jet said a matter-of-factly.

"You're being awfully cocky tonight," I said, crossing my arms over my chest and raising my eyebrows at him.

He shrugged. "Why wouldn't I be?" he asked, as he grabbed my hand and twirled me around so that my arms were no longer crossed, placing me, instead, with my back to him and his arms around me. "I got my girl back," he said, but then his voice turned more serious, "and I'm never going to let you go again, Marina."

His grip around me tightened as I soaked in the meaning of his words. He wanted to be with meâ€"possibly forever. I smiled at the thought. After a few seconds, he dropped my arms, ending the embrace. I knew he had meant figuratively when he said he wouldn't let me go, but, at the moment, I kind of wanted him to mean literally.

"Come on," Jet said leading me away from the road, "Let's go back. You should get at least some sleep tonight."

"And what about you?" I asked, placing plenty of innuendos behind my words.

Jet smiled brazenly at me, immediately picking up on my true meaning and placing an arm over my shoulders. "While I would love to take you up on your offer, with Brad gone, I should probably stand guard."

"You wouldn't have to fall asleep..." I told him, raising my eyebrows.

"After three months of keeping my hands to myself do you really think I could lay next to you without doing anything?"

I pursed my lips, giving him a pleading look despite knowing he was only trying to be a gentleman. "Maybe..." I ran my hands down his sides, placing them on his hips. I knew I was being evilâ€"trying to tempt himâ€"but I couldn't help it. I had missed Jet so much.

He groaned. Firmly taking hold of my hands, he said, "Marina, I can't. We're not alone, you know."

"I know, but a few kisses aren't going to wake anyone. My shouting didn't."

He looked up to the night sky, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yes, but I wouldn't be able to stop myself after 'a few kisses,'" he admitted, "I had to struggle for control when you kissed me back there."

The feel of him pulling the strap of my dress until it fell off my shoulder came to mind. I took the hand he'd released and used it to draw small circles on his shoulder. Looking down at my feet, I whispered, "Maybe I don't want you to stop after a few kisses."

His head snapped back down to me, wondering if I meant what he thought I did.

I bit down on my bottom lip.

His eyes searched mine then slowly travelled down my torso all the way to my bare feet and back up again. Instead of meeting my eyes once more, he looked awayâ€"I didn't have to hear his thoughts to know a war was waging inside of him. Finally he looked back to me and sighed. "You know I would love to, but we can't. Not right now." His eyes darted down to my chest for a second before returning to my face, and I thought he might reconsider. "Besides, we don't know when Brad will be back."

That last bit broke my mood. He was right. Brad returning to find Jet and I lying together would just be cruel. "Okay," I muttered.

He smiled sadly at me. "Another time," he said, leaning over and planting a kiss on my forehead, "Now go get some rest."

I wrapped my arms around his midsection, resting my cheek against his chest. He put his arms around me too and just held me for a few minutes. I felt like he was soaking up all my anxieties, and I immediately felt relieved. I took a deep breath in and smiled. In that moment, I was convinced everything would be okay.

//*/*

That idea died with the rising sun.

I woke the next morning to shouting. For a brief second, I thought I was home again, and the shouting voices belonged to my mom and Cole. But then I recognized them. The first was Fallon and the second wasâ€|Jet?

With my head still under the blanket, I hoped they would stop yelling and let me go back to sleep. Of course, they didn't. I knew Fallon and Jet weren't exactly best buds but I had thought they'd at least have the composure not to start a shouting match with each other.

I peeked out to get a glimpse of the scene. I really didn't want to intervene, but they were my friendsâ€|well, friend and boyfriendâ€|I corrected myself when I recalled the events of the night before.

"This is your fault!" Fallon screamed at Jet, pointing an accusing finger at him.

"How is this my fault?" he bellowed back, not even trying to keep his voice down.

"If you hadn't made out with Marina then everything would still be fine! I.e. your fault!" she shot back.

"She picked me!" Jet shouted, "What was I supposed to do? Nod and thank her?!"

"Actually, Fallon, it's not John's fault." Eloise butted in, something that I was sure was only going to make Fallon angrier, "If you would like to place blame on someone it should be Marina. But you should know that I've only ever seen her choose John. Besides, doesn't this work out better for you?"

Fallon stared at Eloise for a secondâ€|she looked like she was ready to burst. Then she pointed her finger at Eloise. "You," she said, "You can shut up right now." Then she turned back to Jet and yelled, "And you. You could have been more subtle about it!"

"I love her!" Jet said, getting right up in Fallon's faceâ€|crap, he was in knock out rangeâ€|"I was subtle for three months. I am never going to be subtle around her again and I refuse to apologize for it."

"Yeah, well, good going, Mr. Subtltty," Fallon said, her eyes slits and her hands twitching, "You got us stuck here."

It was at that moment that I decided to pull myself out from under the blanket to go and break up the fight. Wiping the gunk from the corners of eyes, I said, "What's going on? What are you two arguing about?"

Jet immediately pulled me into his arms, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "Nothing," he said, "Fallon is overreacting."

"I am not." Beyond Jet's protection I could see Fallon glaring at

Jetâ€”or maybe it was me nowâ€”for allowing her enemy to hold me?

I glanced up at Jet, looking for an answer, but his eyes were still on Fallon.

"You are," he told her.

I turned my gaze on Eloise since she seemed to be the more neutral partyâ€”although she had told Fallon to blame me for whatever the problem was.

Eloise met my gaze but all she said was, "She is."

I sighed and stepped out of Jet's arms. "Will someone please tell me what is going on?"

Tommy approached us then, his forehead brimming with sweat. "I ran a little over a mile down the road to see if I could find anything, but there's nothing," he said, and looked over to me, "Brad's gone."

"You mean he isn't back yet?" I asked, worry leaking into my tone as I turned back to Jet.

Jet shook his head.

Oh no. Eloise was right. This really was my fault. It had been hours since Brad drove off in his car. He could be home by now. Jet had been convinced last night that he just wanted some time to himself, but how much time did he really need? Surely not this much? I knew he wouldn't leave us hereâ€”or would he? Even though I only caught a glimpse of his face as he drove by last night, I could tell he was furious. I wouldn't blame him if he never wanted to see me again.

"I saw this coming," Eloise stated simply.

I thought Fallon was going to jump her right then and there. "Then why the hell didn't you stop him from leaving?"

"I can't change the future."

This time I was with Fallon. If Eloise had intervened for once, maybe Brad wouldn't have run off and we wouldn't be stuck by the side of the road.

"You and her need to relax," Eloise said, gesturing to Fallon and me, "He'll be back."

"You've seen him in your visions?" I asked, then added, "Recently?" Normally, I would avoid asking Eloise what she'd seen in any visions for fear of further embarrassment, but this was a dire situation.

"Of course." She shrugged like it was no big deal.

Fallon looked ready to punch her, but somehow managed to hold back. "Don't you think you should have mentioned this when we first noticed he was missing?" she asked through her teeth, "You sure he's okay? And coming back to get us?"

"Yeah," Eloise said, "but we have a few hours to kill."

A few hours to kill? I looked aroundâ€"there was nothing in sightâ€"what were we going to do in the middle of the desert for a few hours?

This seemed to be on everyone's mind because no one was smiling at the moment.

"I think there's a gas station and a diner about four miles down the road," Tommy said, pointing in the direction from which he'd come running and Brad had driven towards last night, "We could maybe get something for breakfast there?"

We all consented that that was our best option. Either that or sit in the dirt and wait for Brad to show.

Walking four miles without shoes wasn't fun. Since Jet's shoes were too big for me, I had elected to leave them in Brad's car, thinking that if I needed them they would be right there. Of course the world just loved to prove me wrong.

Jet made the walk easier though. He insisted on giving me a piggy back ride for the last two miles when my feet started to burn from the hot ground. There were some definite perks to having him as my boyfriend againâ€"although, I was sure he would have done the same thing even if I hadn't picked him last night.

The diner was very old. It definitely looked like something from the fifties, and I wondered if the place had done any upgrades since then. While the waitress noticed my dirty, burning feet, she didn't say anything. I had a feeling the diner wasn't in any place to turn away customers.

She led the five of us to a table by the window, handing us menus and telling us she would be back to take our order. Jet sat to my right while Eloise took the seat on the end to my left. Fallon positioned herself in the seat across from me, closest to the window. She didn't even open her menuâ€"her eyes remained on the road outside. Despite Eloise's vision and confidence, Fallon clearly wasn't so sure Brad would return.

The waitress returned less than a minute laterâ€"she probably had no idea how long it actually took for someone to decide what to eat, but then again, it was a very small menu. Jet and I both ordered waffles while Tommy ordered an omelet and Fallon ordered pancakes (she was getting the hang of the restaurant thing). Eloise, on the other hand, didn't say anything when the waitress asked her what she wanted.

"Eloise?" I asked, trying to get her attention, but she wouldn't look at me. I followed her line of visionâ€"she seemed to be staring at the clock on the wallâ€"trying to force time to move faster.

That's when I realized she couldn't be watching the clock, she could be seeing something that the rest of us couldn't. She was having a vision.

I quickly turned to the waitress. "Uhh, she's fine," I said lamely, but I could tell the waitress didn't exactly believe me. Not that I

blamed her. By now everyone was staring at Eloise.

Finally she looked down and then back up at the rest of the table. "Sorry," she said casually, "I zoned out for a minute there. I'll have an omelet."

The waitress looked at Eloise like she was crazy—which I was beginning to wonder if she was—but then wrote down her order and walked away. Once she was gone, I leaned in closer to Eloise.

"What did you see?" I asked.

She raised her eyebrows at me then slowly a smile crept onto her face. "I knew you'd catch on," she said, "But I can't tell you."

"Of course not." Fallon groaned.

"but I can tell you that I won't be staying with you much longer," Eloise finished.

"What? Why?" I asked immediately. While Eloise was definitely annoying and I had probably had some of my most embarrassing moments with her, her presence had given me hope that I would figure out the prophecy and things would work out. I mean, having someone who can see the future on your side is definitely an advantage in my book.

Eloise sighed. "That, I also can't tell you." She unfolded her napkin and carefully placed it on her lap. "But don't worry, I'll be back once you figure out the prophecy."

Once I figure out the prophecy? But that could take forever? How will I know when I've got it right?

"So, once Brad comes back I'll need to be dropped off at the next bus station," she said, taking a sip of the water in front of her. She acted like this was no big deal. Like her plans changed so drastically all the time. Who knows? Maybe they actually did. Trying to shape your life around things that haven't happened yet couldn't be easy.

We were silent for the rest of our meal. Everyone—including me—had plenty to think about. I thought about the prophecy, what awaited me at home, and, of course, Brad. Every time my forehead creased, Jet would reach for my hand under the table and squeeze it in a reassuring kind of way. His gesture never failed to put a smile back on my face.

Brad showed up an hour after we finished our meals. He pulled into the gas station, but didn't even get out of the car. Fallon climbed in the front seat next to him while Eloise, Tommy, Jet and I squeezed in the back.

I wanted to say something to him but couldn't think of anything. Nothing I said would make him feel better. He wouldn't even look at me. He definitely didn't want to talk to me. Fallon told Brad how we had to drop Eloise off, but after that everyone remained quiet. Out of respect for Brad, I had positioned myself all the way on the right, with Eloise next to me—well, the reason for that was

probably more so Jet and I wouldn't be tempted to touch each other.

I watched Brad the whole ride but he never took his eyes off the road. It was when we reached Las Vegas that Brad pulled into a bus station to let Eloise out. I climbed out of the car to let her out and everyone else followed, eager to get the chance to stretch their legs.

"Thank you all," Eloise said dramatically, then turned to Brad, "And you shouldn't worry. Everything happens for a reason." She winked at him. From the looks of it, Brad wasn't too pleased with Eloise's advice for him.

I needed to ask her somethingâ€”something that I'd been thinking about ever since she first mentioned changing the future. With everyone still congregated around the car, I pulled Eloise aside. "Can I ask you something about visions in general?"

She nodded.

"Do they always come true?"

Eloise frowned. "You're referring to the prophecy aren't you?"

It was my turn to nod.

She sighed. "Sometimes visions change," she said, "but prophecies are different. They always come true one way or another. I'm sorry. I know that wasn't the answer you were looking for."

I shook my head. I had had a feeling she would say that. I was just going to have to accept that whatever was in the prophecy was going to happen. "Thanks anyway."

We walked back to the group where Eloise insisted on giving everyone an awkward hug. "I'm sure I will see you all again soon!" she said, as she began to walk away. "Oh, and you two?" She pointed between Jet and I. "Don't forget that I might be watching."

My eyes widened at her comment. Watching? What the hell did she mean by that? And why did she say it to me and Jetâ€”ohâ€¦ My cheeks turned bright pink.

Eloise smiled and walked over to the doors to the station where she turned and waved to us enthusiastically. We returned her wave half-heartedly.

"Good riddance," Fallon said, dropping her smile as soon as Eloise turned her back.

"Seriously," Jet said, actually agreeing with Fallon for once.

"It's weird," Tommy said thoughtfully, watching Eloise walk inside.

"What is?" I asked.

"There's nothing in any text I've read about seers being so goddamn annoying."

Everyoneâ€”even Bradâ€”laughed at that.

20. Home Again

****Sooo, the story doesn't end there. I can't believe it's been over a month since I've updated. I'm sorry for not updating sooner, but at least I didn't really leave you hanging this time, right? Anyway, I hope everyone enjoyed the last chapter and thank you for all the reviewsâ€”literally every single one made me smile! You guys are the best. Onto the next chapter of the story because, believe it or not, there's still a lot more left! :)****

Despite the fact that there was now ample room in the car for everyone, I felt more claustrophobic than ever. And although Jet wasn't sitting next to me and Brad wasn't looking at me, I swear I could tell exactly what they were feeling. Who knew you could suffocate from an overpowering mix of love and hate? While I was thankful not to have Eloise's embarrassing comments clogging the air, part of me almost missed her incessant chatter... almost.

Home. Of all the places I'd been to over the past few weeks, all the people I'd met and seenâ€”including my dadâ€”none of them had really, truly, been home. But now, there I was: home again.

Brad pulled up the driveway and Jet got out to grab his bag from the trunk, while Fallon swung her own bag over her shoulder. All I had were the clothes on my back, but I didn't care about that. If anything, I was grateful not to have to stay by Brad's car for longerâ€”he still hadn't said a word to me and I felt that anything I said to him would just be met with awkward silence.

Fallon made a point of telling Brad that she'd see him soon.

He seemed slightly surprised by this statement and added a rushed, "see ya."

What struck me, though, was that Brad made a point of saying goodbye to Jet. It made one thing clearâ€”he didn't have a problem with Jetâ€”he wasn't angry with Jet. He blamed me. Just as Eloise saidâ€”I was the one responsible for this mess. Why did I always manage to screw things up even when I'm trying to fix them?

I knew that when I chose Jet, Brad wouldn't be happy, but I'd foolishly hoped he would be able to put it past him. I foolishly hoped he would want to still be friends.

I listened as Brad's car backed down the driveway. When would be the next time I heard that sound? Would he ever be back? I couldn'tâ€”shouldn'tâ€”worry about that.

Trying to put Brad out of my mind, I made my way to the back of my house. I should be worrying about my mom. My mom who hasn't seen her daughter in three weeks or even known where she was for most of that time.

I didn't know why but I was almost nervous. I could feel both Jet and Fallon waiting for me to make a move, to go inside. Fallon was probably more anxious than I was though. I was confident that my mom

would welcome her into our home, but Fallon didn't know my mom. Her mind was probably going through all the places she could go if she couldn't stay here—having lived in the tribe her whole life I couldn't imagine it being a very long list.

I sighed. It was time to go in. It was time to put everyone out of their misery. It was time for me to come back to reality. I pushed open the back door and stepped into the kitchen, familiar lifetime smells and sounds greeting me.

"Mom?" I called, leading Jet and Fallon farther across the tiled floor. There was a pounding of feet and Skye and Cole appeared in the doorway, eyes wide and staring at me like I was a ghost. A second later though, they were pushed aside as my mom rushed into the room. I was swept into her arms and I happily wrapped my own arms around her.

Time ticked by as she held me, but I didn't mind. I hadn't realized how much I truly missed her until she was there in front of me, holding me tight against her. Finally she pulled back, her eyes scanning my entire body as if she couldn't believe it was actually me.

"You're okay," she breathed, "You're home."

"I told you I'd be home," I said, my lips turned up in a smile.

She just nodded, a tear running down her cheek, fingers brushing my hair behind my ear.

"Mom—mom," I whispered. I didn't know how she was going to react to what I was going to tell her, "I saw Dad. We tried to get him out of the tribe too. Bu-but they came after us, and he went back s-so we could get away."

She immediately pulled me close again. Speaking so only I could hear her, she said, "It's okay, sweetheart. I'm sure he's fine. I'm just happy you're home safe."

Releasing me, she looked around me and smiled. I turned as she stepped forward and pulled Jet into a hug too. "Thank you, John—for bringing my daughter back to me."

Jet didn't smile when they stepped away from each other. Glancing between my mother, brother and sister, he said, "I would never let anything happen to her."

My mom's eyes shifted between Jet and I—"understanding more than perhaps anyone else in the room.

"Mom," I said, stepping aside so Fallon couldn't hide any longer, "this is Fallon. She's another tribe escapee."

My mom looked like she wanted to laugh. She reached and put an arm around Fallon's shoulders. "It seems we have become the halfway house for runaway tribe members." Spotting Fallon's confused face she laughed. "You, my dear, are welcome to stay as long as you like. You can officially consider yourself part of the family."

"Thank you," Fallon said, smiling.

My mom shrugged. Looking around the room she said, "I basically have four kids anyway. What's one more?"

I motioned to my siblings. "This is Skye and Cole," I told Fallon.

"Here dear," my mom interrupted, steering Fallon towards the stairs, "I'll show you to your room."

"My room?" Fallon asked, surprised.

"Of course. You have to have someplace to sleep."

When my mom and Fallon disappeared upstairs, Skye immediately spoke up. "So, what the hell happened to you?"

"It's a long story," I said.

"Well, you know we want to hear everything so you might as well get started," Cole said as he pulled out a chair at the kitchen table. The four of us each took a chair as I began to tell them about how Taz was waiting for me at the airport when I returned from Australia. My mom and Fallon appeared when I began talking about the tribe, also taking seats at the table. Fallon and Jet butted in occasionally as I told them all that had happened to me over the past few weeks.

This time, I told them everything. I told them about the tribe, Sebastian, Yvette, and Taz. I told them about my training—"though I chose to hold off on telling them I could actually turn into any animal. I told them about Fallon getting me in to see Dad, Jet and Brad showing up, all of us escaping. I told them about the shapeshifter-turned-supernatural prison—how we found Tommy and Eloise there, along with a number of supernaturals we didn't even know existed, realizing as I recounted my story that we'd never learned how Tommy had ended up there in the first place.

Finally, I told them about the prophecy and how I could now turn into virtually any animal I wanted—"of course, I had already told my mom about the turning in any animal part over the phone, but Cole and Skye didn't know.

Their reactions were difficult to gauge. At first they seemed skeptic then wary, and then they seemed to open their minds to the possibilities. As long as they weren't jealous or angry or something.

"Let me get this straight," Skye said, placing her hands down on the table, "You can go flying with me now?"

I wavered back and forth. "Sort of. I'm actually a pretty sucky flyer," I confessed, "You'll have to teach me a few things."

Skye just smiled wide and nodded excitedly.

Cole, on the other hand, did not. "This isn't good," he said, "If anyone found out about this you'd be hunted to the ends of the Earth."

I raised my eyebrows at him. "I kind of already have. First with the

hunters and then with the tribe. I think I know how to handle it by now."

He frowned. "But the hunters don't actually know you can turn into any animal, right?"

Slowly, I shook my head. "Well, except for Brad."

"Keep it that way."

I rolled my eyes at him but didn't say anything. Under the table, Jet took my hand and squeezed it in a comforting way. I shot him a small smile.

Everyone was silent for awhile after that.

"How about I just order pizza for dinner?" my mom asked suddenly, standing up, "And I guess I better call the school to let them know they'll have a new student."

"A new student?" I asked.

My mom raised her eyebrows at me. "If Fallon is going to be living with us, then she has to get a proper education."

Fallon's chair screeched against the floor as she quickly stood. "Uhh, that's alright, Mrs. Keller," she said, "I'm sure I can find another place to stay."

My mom whirled around and pointing a finger at the empty chair, said, "Sit." Fallon sat down faster than she stood up. I had to stifle a laughâ€"Fallon didn't take orders from anyone, but she listened to my mom faster than any of us ever did. Unfortunately, Fallon caught my attempted restraint and kicked my shin from under the table.

"Umm, Mom?" I asked, "Where does everyone think I've been?" I paused. "Oh god, you didn't actually call the police did you?"

"Of course not," Cole jumped in, "When you didn't show up at the airport, we came home and noticed that your guard had mysteriously disappeared. We knew the tribe had to have had something to do with it, so I tracked Geoff down. He refused to say anything other than 'she is safe.' We weren't happy about it but we knew the police couldn't do anything."

"I kept tabs on Tanner at school and tried to talk to him when I could," Skye explained, "But mostly we just had to wait to hear from you."

I nodded. I wondered if I would have done the same thing if I'd been in their position.

"Marina," my mom said gently, and I knew whatever she was going to say next wasn't good news. I didn't know if I could handle any more bad news though. "Something happened, two days ago, while you were gone."

"What?" I asked, my nerves starting to rise. Jet squeezed my hand again, sensing my anxiety.

"It's about Grace," she continued, "Her father was found dead in the woods yesterday. They say it was an animal attack."

I was speechless. Grace. Excitable Grace, who has been one of my closest friends since middle school, had just lost her father. And not just lost him but had him suddenly taken from her.

"An animal attack?" Jet repeated, confusion written all over his face, "What type of animal do they think it was?"

Cole hunched his shoulders. "They don't know yet."

"What was he doing in the woods?" Of all the years I'd known Grace's father, he'd never been one for nature—it's where Grace got her aversion of it.

"Hiking it seems," my mom answered, "They're holding a funeral service for him outside the high school tomorrow afternoon." It was fitting that the service would be held on school grounds. Grace's father was the high school principal and I had never seen a man more devoted to his work than Principal Wang.

"I'm guessing they cancelled school then," I murmured, secretly thankful I didn't have to face everyone, especially Grace—I never knew how to properly express my condolences—for another day.

"Actually no," Skye said, a bit of bitterness in her voice, "The new principal has insisted that we try to get back into the swing of things as soon as possible, so school is in session."

"There's already a new principal?" Jet asked.

My mom nodded. "I don't know how the school board approved his appointment so quickly, but Mr. Price is certainly on top of things. He made a statement yesterday saying he wanted to give everyone the chance to mourn but he didn't want the loss to affect the students' academics."

"Of course he did," I muttered. Maybe it was my loyalty to Grace, but I already had I feeling that I wouldn't like this new principal.

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Nothing but whispers bounced off the hallway walls the next day. To say the mood was solemn was an understatement. Although people did seem to perk up, or at least take the time to glance questioningly at me, whenever I passed by. No doubt Skye had made up some story about where I'd been the past few weeks, but the fact that Jet, Brad, and Tommy had all mysteriously disappeared as well, was enough to make people suspicious.

Before classes started, I took Fallon to the front office to get her schedule. It ended up that she had most of her classes with me, and the ones she didn't have she had with Brad, Jet, or Tommy. It was lucky—well, maybe not when it came to the class she had with Jet—they still didn't get along very well. At first, I thought that was why Fallon chose not to sit with us at lunch, but that was before I realized who she was sitting with: Brad. Of course he would refuse

to sit at the same table as me. Since Grace wasn't in school, it was only Connor and Annie who didn't know what had happened between Brad and I, but thankfully neither of them asked about Brad. They were much more interested in my "cousin" Fallon.

While Fallon kept Brad company at lunchâ€”something Brad used to do for meâ€”I tried to come up with ways to confront Brad. We had gym together next and that seemed like the perfect time to talk. But, that plan went down the drain when our gym instructor announced that we'd be splitting into boy and girl groups for the next week. It didn't matter though. I would talk to him eventually.

Before the next period, I caught sight of a tall, blonde head at the other end of the hall. "Brad!" I called out. He turned saw me and began walking in the other direction. "Brad!" I yelled again, running after him. I needed to talk to himâ€”he couldn't ignore me forever. But by the time I had reached the corner he'd disappeared around he had truly gone.

"Forget about him."

I turned around to find Fallon standing behind me. "I can't just cut him out of my life," I told her.

Fallon rolled her eyes at me. "I didn't say that," she said, "But I do suggest you forget about him, since he's clearly keen on cutting you out of his life."

I frowned. That couldn't be true.

Fallon sighed. "Look, I know it's harsh, but it's true. You chose Jet, do you want to take back that decision?"

I shook my head. I never wanted to be separated from Jet again, just like he'd told me.

"I didn't think so," Fallon stated, "You have to let Brad go. He needs to be the one to decide how you two proceed from hereâ€”you can't force him."

I sighed, knowing she was right. "Fine, Miss Know-It-All. I'll leave him alone."

"Good." She smiled. "Now, what is this concert thing everyone is talking about?"

"Oh!" I exclaimed, "The Coast Con! It's this Saturday. I completely forgot about it."

"Still haven't answered my question."

"It's this thing the high school sponsors every year. There's usually a huge band that performs and the whole town comes out to listen. The senior class uses it to raise money for prom and such," I explained.

"Are we going to go?" Fallon asked.

"Yeah, if you want to."

"I do, so let's go. Also, could you tell where Room 312 is? Brad and I have Psychology together next, and he said he'd try to save me a seat."

I gawked at her. "What happened to leaving him alone?"

She shrugged. "I said you needed to stay away from him. I didn't say I had to."

It was my turn to roll my eyes.

Fallon ignored me though. "So?" she said, expectantly, "The Psychology classroom?"

I pointed her in the right direction before heading off to my own classroom. I didn't bother taking my seat once I got there, instead choosing to stand beside the teacher's desk to wait for her. I had been playing catch up all day—"missing three weeks of school entailed a lot more make-up work than I thought.

But before I could get a chance to talk to my teacher, Jet walked into the classroom, took my hand and pulled me towards the windows.

"What are you doing?" I asked, "I have to talk to Mrs. Geheart about what I missed."

"I know," Jet mused, winding his arms around my hips, "but I was thinking—"

I distinctly heard a female voice in the room whisper "damn it," but when I looked to see who it was every girl was mysteriously looking the other way. Ignoring the jealousy fumes wafting throughout the room, I turned back to Jet. "You were thinking?" I prompted.

Jet smiled. "I was thinking about Friday."

I frowned. "What about it?"

He shrugged, but smiled wider. "It seems like a good day to me."

Shaking my head, I laughed. "For what?"

Jet pulled me closer to him. "For a date."

I raised my eyebrows. A date? Was he serious?

"I'm serious," he said, reading my mind, "I realized we've never been on a real date before and that's not right." He ran his fingers through my hair. "My girlfriend at least deserves one night where I can dote on her incessantly."

I smiled up at him. "You don't have to do that, Jet."

Taking my hands in his, he said, "Don't be silly. I want to." Then changing to a whisper, he continued, "Just because we aren't a normal couple doesn't mean we can't do normal things...like going on a date."

I honestly felt like I could be bursting with joy right then. How did Jet always know what to say to make me happy?

"I'll pick you up at seven then," he said before placing a soft kiss on my forehead and letting me go so we could take our seats.

It was definitely good to be home.

21. Tinting

****Yay! Another chapter finished! Thank you everyone for all the reviews from the last chapter. You guys are literally the best :D****

****Also, *_BookPaige54_*, I forgot to tell you that your character, Kayleigh, will be in the story. Surprise! :) She appears in this chapter briefly and will have a larger role a few chapters down. I did change her a bit (sorry I couldn't make ninja work haha), but I hope you like what I do with her.****

Previously in the California Secrets trilogyâ€|****

It was a report detailing how a man named Nathan Richter had violated a restraining order. I scrolled through the document looking for the connection. Then I found it. The woman who had filed the restraining order lived at the same address provided for the lost dog. The woman's name was listed as Deanna Sheppard. D. Sheppardâ€"it had to be Deirdre's alias. I smiled. I had found her.

****And for reference: ****

_When red tints Roe, the war of light will begin__
>_Those of the rainbow will be the first plagued__
>_Magus will bare them and fill the dark with fear_

_But one of many forms will ascend and change__
>_the course of fate for a brother Descendant__
>_Together, the one will lead embracing light to fight_

Only one can join the sun at dawn

Now, on with the story!****

When the final bell rang at three, the entire student body filed out to the fields in the back of the school. The usual soccer and field hockey goals had been moved and instead the fields were surrounded by hoards of different flowers. Hundreds of chairs were set up in rows facing a pulpit and a rather large portrait of Principal Wang. Already seated in the front row were Grace, her mother, and people who I assumed were other family members.

I wanted to go tell her I was sorryâ€"that I was there for herâ€"but our teachers turned into ushers, getting us to file into the rows quickly and quietly. I didn't even get to sit beside any of my friends. I spotted Jet with Tommy and Annie across the aisle, smiling sadly that we hadn't found each other sooner. I also took note of Brad sitting with Fallon a few rows ahead of me, and Connor and Skye a few rows behind.

The service was simple and put together nicely, so they properly honored the man Principal Wang had been. Watching Grace with her mother and the rest of the family, I found my thoughts wandering to Jet and his real parents. We may know that his birth mother was Deirdre, but we had no idea who his father is. We may have discovered that his mother was dead but that didn't mean his father was too. He deserved to know everything he could about his real family. The information in the facility wasn't the only information out there.

I was jolted back into the present when the new principal took the podium. What did he think he was doing? I glanced down at the program in front of me—whatever he was doing, it wasn't a part of the funeral service. I couldn't help but frown during his entire speech. Something about expressing his condolences to the family and then how he would be sure that Principal Wang's legacy would continue but that he has a duty to the community to improve things as well. Again, I wasn't sure if it was my loyalty to Grace or my developing personal grudge, but I just didn't like the guy.

A sad song later, and the service was over. I quickly found Jet (and Tommy and Annie) and got in line to talk to Grace—well, the line was specifically to tell the family how sorry you were for their loss. Jet took my hand in his as we shuffled forward.

It was only a minute before I couldn't take it anymore. "Okay," I said, turning to everyone, "Was it just me or was the new principal's speech uncalled for?"

Annie shrugged. "I guess so."

"I think he's just trying to establish himself," Tommy said.

"But was the funeral really right place to do that?"

"Yeah, probably not," Jet said, agreeing.

After that, nobody said anything as we slowly made our way toward the front where Grace was standing. She stood up straight, between her mother and a teenage girl who, despite looking nothing like Grace or her parents, I knew was somehow related to her.

The line picked up, moving us closer, which made me wonder more about what I was going to say to Grace. If there was one thing I was bad at (besides singing), it was dealing with loss. While I had tried to be sensitive to Stephen about Brett and Bryn dying, he hadn't received my sympathies well. And while it might have been foolish, I was worried the same thing would happen with Grace.

I let Tommy and Annie go ahead of me, sticking close to Jet.

"She's not going to blame you," he whispered to me. I looked up at him. "For not being here," he clarified, "when it happened. You're here now and that's what matters."

I smiled at him, even though I hadn't been worried about that. I hadn't even considered that.

Annie rushed forward into Grace's arms when she got the chance, and remained there in her best friend's arms for many moments. By the time she let go, Grace had tears in her eyes again. Annie promised to

see her later, and, continuing down the line of family, she also embraced the girl beside Grace. After Annie, Tommy approached and expressed his condolences while Grace told him it was good to see him.

So then it was my turn, and words began pouring from my mouth. "I'm so sorry, Grace. This shouldn't have happened. I should have been thereâ€"

But Grace cut me off by pulling me into a hug. "I'm so glad you're here," she said, and with that one sentence I relaxed. We broke apart, and looking to Jet, she added, "_Both_ of you."

Knowing Grace, she had already picked up on Jet and I being officially together again. I could tell she wanted to ask me about it, but knew now was not the right time. Instead, she turned to the girl on her right and said, "Marina, John, this is my cousin, Kayleigh."

"Nice to meet you," Kayleigh said.

"You too," I said, looking down, surprised to find she had held out her hand to meâ€"I hadn't even seen her stick it out. I hastily took it though, trying not to seem awkward. She shot Jet a smile before Jet and I continued down the line and reached the end. As Jet placed his arm around me, I spotted the new principal in the middle aisle, talking with a bunch of parents. I wondered if he was already trying to start his own legacy.

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An hour later, Jet, Fallon and I were sitting around my family's kitchen table, handwritten copies of the prophecy in front of each of us. We were supposed to be trying to interpret it, but I had been staring at the piece of paper as if it wasn't even there for at least fifteen minutes. I just couldn't focus.

Beside me, Fallon's new cell phone beeped, indicating she had a new text. She scooped it up before I got the chance to see who it wasâ€"not that I didn't already know who it was. She only had four numbers in her phone: mine, Jet's, my mom's, and Brad's.

"What'd he say?" I asked, leaning closer to her.

"He's not coming," she said and I sat back in my chair. "Did you really think he would?"

I didn't respond. I had hoped that when Fallon invited Brad to come help us, he would take the invitation, but clearly I was hoping a bit too much. Jet was silent too. I couldn't imagine he was very comfortable talking about a guy I admitted to once lovingâ€"still lovingâ€"even if it was now only in friendship. Another ten minutes went by.

Jet pushed the paper further away from him. "I just can't get the idea of blood out of my head," he said, holding up his head with his hands.

I scrunched up my lips. "Probably because of Grace's dad."

Jet nodded and lifted his eyes to me. "Sorry I'm not more help, Mar."

I slid my own paper with the prophecy on it to the center of the table. "It's okay. We're not going to get anywhere just by rereading it," I said.

"Should we get to work on homework instead?" Fallon asked, almost eagerly—"I guess she didn't exactly have normal homework back in the tribe.

Still, I wrinkled my nose at the thought. "Definitely not. Actually, let's do some research."

"On what?" she asked.

I ignored her and focused my attention on Jet instead. "I think we should look into Deirdre again," I said.

His head shot up at the mention of his birth mother's name. "Why?" he asked.

I wondered if he had told anyone other than me what he'd discovered back in the facility. Probably not. That was personal information, and, these days it seemed Jet didn't have a lot of personal information to keep to himself. Still, if there was more on his real parents out there, then he deserved to know it.

I shrugged, trying not to make a big deal out of it. "I don't think we've exhausted all our possibilities," I told him.

"Like what?" he asked, not seeming particularly enthused.

"Like this Nathan Richter guy," I said, giving him a look, "or even the person who put up the lost dog sign." How could he not want to know about his parents? When my dad told Cole, Skye and I that he was a shapeshifter, I couldn't ask enough questions. I wanted to know everything.

Jet's expression softened. "Okay," he said, resigning.

I smiled at him. Who knows? Maybe we would even find out who his birth father is.

Just then the back door burst open and Tommy fell through. "Did you figure anything out?" he asked, huffing like he was out of breath.

Clearly any research regarding Jet's parents would have to wait.

Fallon frowned at Tommy. "Did you run here?"

"Just from the car—" Tommy said hesitantly, "But that doesn't matter. No one answered my question." He looked between the three of us, waiting for a response.

"No," I piped up, "you didn't miss anything."

"Okay, good," Tommy rushed, pulling out the last chair at the table,

"Because I've been thinking about the line 'when red tints roe.'"

"What about it?"

"What if red doesn't actually refer to something physical but the actual color red? Like the color of an aura for example," he suggested, removing his hands from the table.

"You're referring to how sorcerers have red auras, aren't you?" Jet asked.

Tommy nodded.

"If that's true then the line would mean sorcerers would infiltrateâ€|roe," I mentally smacked myself on the head, "and Roe refers to the huntersâ€"who are all descended from the first hunter, Roe!"

I could tell Jet was mentally smacking himself too. "Of course. That's part of the reason Brad is connected to this in the first place. I can't believe we didn't figure this out sooner."

I had to agree with him. I didn't know how much shapeshifter history Fallon knewâ€"not actually being one herselfâ€"but, between the two of us, Jet and I should have recognized the name.

I scrunched my mouth to the side. "We were too hung up on it possibly referring to blood or love." I reread the first two lines of the prophecy. "That means that the second line could be referring to shapeshifters; we have rainbow auras."

"Fine, so let's say sorcerers are going to try and influence the hunters to get to the shapeshifters," Fallon started, "how will we know if they do?" She looked over to Tommy. "You're not a part of some interconnected wizard coven or something, are you?"

Tommy raised his eyebrows, smiling at her. "No, aside from the _sorcerer_ council over in France, sorcery is generally something practiced within families."

"Could this _sorcerer_ council be the ones infiltrating the hunters?"

He shook his head fervently. "Absolutely not. They would be the ones to stop that kind of thing. They are strictly against us using our powers on non-supernaturals."

"Something else we're not asking is what would sorcerers want with the hunters?" Jet posed, glancing around at each of us before his eyes also landed on Tommy.

"Not sure," he responded, "Perhaps to stop them from hunting shapeshifters?"

I pursed my lips. "Maybe, but I just have this feeling that the line is talking about something bad, not good."

Fallon looked like she was going to protest, but Jet got his word in first.

"Then it's a bad thing," he stated firmly.

I shot him a questioning look.

"You're the one in the prophecy," he explained, "You have the closest ties to it. We should trust your gut on this."

I smiled gratefully at him.

"So it's bad, whatever," Fallon said, wafting her hand in the air as if that detail was irrelevant, "How can we stop them when they do? Last I checked I can't exactly fight magic with fistsâ€”though I'd love to try."

She was right. I had only seen Tommy use his magic to fight once when Shira had control of the whole town, and he hadn't actually been trying to hurt those people, only keep them away from him by using a spell that sent some sort of wind at them. I couldn't imagine what he would be capable of if he actually tried to hurt someone. Even though Tommy claimed to be no good with spells, I could tell otherwise. He was talented. But, even with him on our side, how could we fight multiple sorcerers if we couldn't even touch them?

But then a more disturbing thought crossed my mind. Shifting my gaze between each of my friends, I said, "What if they already have?"

"I think we would know if Harry Potter was ordering around a bunch of guys with guns," Fallon remarked.

"Actually we're more like Merlin." Tommy laughed.

But I watched as Jet tensed at Fallon's words. "What is it?" He didn't answer me. "Jet?"

Slowly he turned in my direction. "The bullet," he whispered.

Everyone frowned. "What bullet?"

He took a deep breath in. "The one that you got shot with," he said, "Do you remember what Brad said when I told you should shift to heal?"

I struggled to remember. Most of what I remember from getting shot was the pain. "He saidâ€”he said that the bullet would stop my healing."

Jet nodded. "He told me that if you shifted with the bullet inside you it would burst into a hundred smaller pieces that would lodge themselves in your flesh. He said that the bullet would _recognize_ your shift," he elaborated, "If shapeshifting is supernatural, how can a normal bullet recognize it?"

"It can't," I said, eyes wide, understanding what he was getting at, "_unless_, it's enhanced by magic."

"Are you saying that this part of the prophecy has already happened?" Fallon asked, glancing between me and Jet.

Our heads bobbed in sync.

"If this is true then there isn't much left in the prophecy to take place," Tommy said, "Since you've already gotten Brad are your side."

I pulled a copy of the prophecy back towards me. He was right. That left only three lines. None of which we had any idea what they meantâ€"although I had a nagging feeling that the last one was referencing deathâ€"I just hoped I was wrong.

"Before we do anything, we need to make sure we're right about the sorcerer thing," Jet said.

"We need Brad," I said, standing up.

Fallon sighed. "I told you, you're not going to get him over here."

My jaw was taut. "Then I'll just have to go to him."

"Are you insane?" Fallon exclaimed, also getting to her feet, "You can't go over thereâ€"that'd be like walking into the wolf's den bleeding from every limb." She smirked. "No pun intended."

Jet took my hand in his. "Fallon's right," he said, agreeing with her for once. "You can't go over there, especially if sorcerers are in control now. They'd be able to see your aura and know what you are. You'd get yourself killed."

I sighed. "Fine." Sitting back down, I felt conviction fill me. "But at school tomorrow Brad won't be able to avoid me. I'll force him to talk to me if I have to."

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Jet and I spent the rest of the night working on homework and looking up more information about Nathan Richter. I rediscovered the restraining order Deirdre had placed against him, but nothing else. Jet tried to act like this didn't bother him, but I could tell otherwise. Just as I suspected, he wanted to know as much as he could.

"Maybe we can find out who made the lost dog poster?" I suggested, looking over to Jet. His face was lit up by the computer screen. It had gotten dark long ago, but neither of us had bothered to get up to turn on a light. "I mean, if they put out a notice about a lost dog, they had to have known Deirdre was a shapeshifter."

He shrugged. "Yeah, I guess."

I took that as a yes. Cross-searching the address listed on both the restraining order and the poster with the year Deirdre would have lived there, I scanned through the results.

"Wait!" Jet said suddenly.

"What?"

"Go back," he said, "Scroll up."

I did as he commanded.

"There! That one."

I clicked on the link he indicated. Reading through the information, I realized that this was her: the woman we were looking for.

"Janet Baxter," Jet read aloud, "she was my mother's roommate."

I retyped her name into the search bar. A photo and a current address popped up. "She lives nearby," I said, glancing back at Jet.

"Let's go," he said, staring at the screen, "I think it's time I learned who my mother really was."

I bit my lip. "And why she filed a restraining order against this Nathan Richter guy."

22. Peek in the Past

****100 REVIEWS! ALREADY?! Wow, THANK YOU soooooooo much! With each review you guys make my day. You are wonderful, terrific, awesome, and perfect. THANK YOU! :D****

****Onto the next chapter! Soâ€|this one's pretty intense, and I feel like that is all I should say because I might give things away. Hope you gasp! ;) ****

The promise of new information regarding Jet's parents came as a welcome distraction to the possibility that sorcerers might have been controlling the hunters for at least four months. While I tried not to think about it, I was still determined to get Brad alone at some point. I had to find out what he knewâ€if he could determine whether he was working for a bunch of sorcerers.

The pessimistic side of my brain wondered if perhaps Brad knew about the sorcerers all this time, and had been ordered by them to get close to me. But the more trusting side squashed that thoughtâ€Brad hadn't betrayed me yet and I believed him when he said he never would. That part of me also didn't want to admit that I missed the fun guy who'd taken me out on his jet-ski. While the other part was just angry at him for acting like I didn't exist. And that was the part taking over as the bell for homeroom rang the next morning. I didn't care what it tookâ€I was going to get answers out of him.

I spotted Brad a little ways down the hall, walking in my directionâ€well he was probably inadvertently walking towards me since I was waiting outside our first class. Sure enough, he promptly ignored me as he walked through the door, but I didn't care. That would be the last time he ignored me. I followed him into the classroom, making sure no one came between us. Like yesterday, he passed his normal seat and continued down the aisle, taking one in the very back of the room instead. Before he could do anything to stop me, I sat down in the seat beside him.

I didn't say anything. I just sat next to him. He glanced around at the remaining empty chairs, most likely wondering whether it would be too much to get up and change his seat again. I was grateful when he

didn't. That would have been too mean.

I pulled my notebook from my bag, opening to the first page where I had slid a printed copy of Janet Baxter's current address and picture. Then I turned to Brad. He may not want to talk to me but he couldn't help but listen to me.

"Brad," I started softly. He kept staring straight ahead. "Look, I know you don't want to be around me right now, but we're worried. Weâ€" "

"What is that?" Brad asked suddenly, leaning closer to my desk.

"Huh? What?"

"That picture," he said, pointing to the page in my notebook, "Who is that woman?"

I picked up the sheet, glancing between Brad and the photo of Janet Baxter. "We think she used to live with Jet's mom," I told him, studying his expression. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. "Do youâ€"do you know her?" Was it possible that it wasn't Nathan Richter who was the hunter, but Janet Baxter?

Brad frowned, still staring at the picture, before he slowly shook his head. "Noâ€"but I think I've seen her somewhere before. I don't remember where exactly."

"Well, if you remember," I prompted, "will you tell me?" I couldn't help but widen my eyes in a hopeful expression.

He looked up at me and held my gaze. If there was one thing I saw in his eyes it was how much he missed me. And for a moment there, I thought we would be able to go back to the way things were beforeâ€"before there was the tribe, before there was the prophecy, before everything got complicated. But then he snapped his eyes back down to the desk in front of him, rubbing his hands together.

I couldn't stand to see him like thatâ€"hurtâ€"knowing I had caused it. I looked away too, not expecting him to give me an answer or even talk to me again.

"Yeah," he whispered, just loud enough so I could hear.

"Alright, class, who can tell me what role the witches play in Macbeth?" Our teacher posed the question to the twenty-something of us.

It was only then that I realized I hadn't warned Brad about the sorcerers.

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"She might refuse to talk to me," Jet said as Fallon split off from us on the way to her own room.

"I don't think she'd do that," I told him, walking into my room and throwing my school bag on the floor. I was more worried about Janet Baxter possibly being a hunter and wanting to kill Jet.

I hadn't managed to talk to Brad again during school, so he still didn't get the message about the sorcerers. We needed him to use his ability to see auras to search the hunters close to his family, and the longer I waited to ask him to do it, the more at risk we became.

"She might not remember Deirdre," Jet pointed out, sitting down on the edge of my bed and allowing his backpack to slide to the floor.

I sighed. "You need to stop worrying. Everything will be fine," I assured him. As I carefully closed the door, a smile crept onto my face.

"Sorry," he said as I walked over to sit down beside him, "It's just thatâ€œ"

"This woman could be your only chance to find out who your mother was," I finished for him. Looking up at him, I slid my fingers into his.

He nodded, squeezing my hand.

Turning to face him, I reached my other hand up to the side of his face, draping my fingers down from his eyes to his jaw. Leaning in closer, I whispered, "Well, I'm sure she doesn't get off work until five, so we have some time to kill before we show up at her house." Biting my lip, I ran my hand down the length of his torso, feeling his muscles twitch beneath my touch. His gaze followed my hand until I reached his hips, then he snapped his eyes back up to my face. "How about a little distraction?" I teased.

His hands immediately found my hips, pulling my body closer to him and I wound my arms around the back of his neck, twisting his hair between my fingertips. He placed his lips on mine, kissing me gently, savoring every touch.

I grappled for more, moving my lips all over his. He responded by gripping me tighter and kissing me deeper. Bracing a hand on each of his broad shoulders and scrunching the fabric of his shirt between my thumb and index finger, I swung my leg over to the other side of his hips and carefully eased my weight on top of him. With me now straddling him, things quickly became more heated.

His hands slipped beneath my shirt, caressing the smooth skin of my back. I kissed him more fervently, moving my hands down the length of his chest and abdomen again. Gripping the bottom seam of his t-shirt, I tugged it upwards. Pulling away from our kiss, he held his arms up so I could pull his shirt up and over his head. Smiling, I tossed it to the floor and turned back to Jet. I ran my hands all over his sculpted chest before he pulled me back in for another kiss.

His own hands were just about to lift my shirt up when the door to my bedroom burst open and we broke apart. "Guysâ€œ"

Eyes wide and mouth hanging open slightly, Fallon shouted, "Ohmigod! Get a room!"

I scrambled off of Jet, who quickly stood up and snatched his t-shirt

up off the floor. "In case you hadn't noticed," Jet said, shooting Fallon an evil look, "we did get a room. The question is: what are you doing in it?"

Fallon crossed her arms and glared back at him. "You know a little warning sign or something would be nice the next time you two decide to get comfortable."

Jet pulled his shirt back over his head, covering his bare chest. "Maybe you're not familiar with how a relationship works, but these things aren't usually planned. Besides, you're not the first person I'm going to run to with details about my love life."

"Oh yeah? Wellâ€" "

"Enough!" I yelled, finally standing up and putting myself between the two. So much for getting along. "Fallon, what's going on?"

She huffed, unwilling to let go of her hostility towards Jet. "Brad is downstairs," she said, looking to me.

"Brad?"

Fallon nodded.

"Really?" I asked, hardly able to believe her words.

Fallon rolled her eyes. "No, I barged in here and sawâ€|things I can't erase from my mind, because I wanted to," she said, grimacing.

Jet smirked at her. "Don't even try," he laughed, "You know you liked it."

I shot him a look, shoving him playfully.

"Hey," he protested, rubbing his arm and smiling at me, "I know I did."

I bit my lip to keep from smiling too much. "What is he doing here?" I asked Fallon.

She shrugged. "How should I know? He just showed up."

Pushing past her, I silently shook my head. We made our way down the steps and I smoothed my shirt so it wasn't bunched over my stomach. As I walked through the entryway, I saw that it really was Brad who was standing in my kitchen. I had to admit that it was someplace I never expected to see him again.

"There you are," he said, as if he'd been trying to get a hold of me all day, "There's something I've been meaning to tell you."

He looked worried and I briefly wondered if I didn't have to warn him about the sorcerersâ€"that maybe he'd figured it out himself and had come to warn me. That would be conveniently ironic.

"What's up?"

"I wouldn't be here unless it was absolutely necessary," he said,

"But I think this could be important."

"Alright already," Fallon said, gesturing for him to talk faster, "Get on with it."

Brad glanced around at each of us before he spoke again. "Things have beenâ€|differentâ€|since we got back."

I frowned. What was he talking about? "Different how?" I prompted, crossing my arms over my chest.

"With the hunters," Brad continued, "We received new orders the day we got back in town."

"Orders?" Fallon asked, stepping forward, "From whom?"

"The higher ups?" Brad answered, phrasing his response as more of a question, "I'm not exactly at the top of the hunter feudal system here. All I know is that we received orders not to kill any shapeshifters we come across but capture them."

"Capture?" I voiced aloud, "And do what with them?"

"Hand them over to the people at the top," Brad said, "My dad is supposed to transport them to specific locationâ€|one that he refuses to share with me." Brad looked down. "I don't think he trusts me anymore."

"With good reason," Fallon remarked.

Brad's gaze snapped up to her, frowning.

She shrugged. "What?" she asked, "It's not like he's wrong to suspect you. You are a shapeshifter hunter who is helping shapeshifters."

Brad shook his head. "But I don't think he suspects me of flat-out betrayalâ€|yet." He sighed and ran his fingers through his blonde hair. "He just sees me as a rebellious teen. And the whole disappearing for awhile probably helped with that image-just as long as that's the only image he has of me."

"Do you think this whole 'capture not kill' thing could have something to do with our infiltration of the facility in Arizona? We did set free dozens of shapeshifters and other supernaturals," Jet mused.

Brad considered this for a moment. "It is a possible explanation," he said, "If only we could find out where they were being taken."

"There haven't been any shapeshifters captured yet, have there?" I asked.

"Nah, I don't think so," Brad said, "Like I said, the orders only came in a few days ago."

"Well, if you can, try to keep an eye out for that," I told him.

Brad nodded grimly. "There's something else," he said, "There are at least fifteen new hunters that have come to the area."

I exchanged a look with Jet and Fallon.

"At first I thought it was in response to the battle from last fall, but then I realized that that's an awfully long time to wait to send backup. And these hunters don't really seem familiar with the regular equipment," Brad explained, and then looked between the three of us, "What is it?"

"Tommy figured out a line of the prophecy," I said, "The 'red tints Roe' part. We think it means that sorcerers will control the hunters."

"So you think that these new hunters are actually sorcerers?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yes, and we need you to use your special ability for seeing supernatural auras to let us know if our suspicions are true."

Brad smiled. "I think I can manage that."

I scoffed. "Good."

"We better get going, Mar," Jet said, and I glanced at the clock above the kitchen sink, "It's almost five and who knows if Janet Baxter will even be home."

Jet, Fallon and I all moved towards the back door. "Yeah, okay," I said, then turned back to Brad, who hadn't moved, "We have to go now, but if you could do that, that'd be great."

"I'm coming with you," Brad said, trailing us out the door.

Jet stopped dead in his tracks. "Why?" he asked, sounding slightly hostile as he turned to face Brad, "This has nothing to do with you."

"It's got nothing to do with me either, but I'm still coming," Fallon pointed out.

Jet glared at her. "If I could leave you behind, I would."

"I'm coming, because this does have something to do with me," Brad said, then he looked at me pointedly, "I told you I'd tell you if I remembered where I'd seen her before, didn't I?" He pulled a folded photograph out of the back pocket of his jeans and shoved it in Jet's hands.

I leaned over Jet's shoulder as he unfolded it. The picture showed three people—two girls and one guy—who I would've guessed to be in their early twenties—with their arms around each other. There were two girls and one guy, and, even though the picture was several years old, I could tell exactly who each person in the photograph was: Janet Baxter, Deirdre, and Brad's father.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, watching as Jet's fingers inadvertently traced over his mother's face.

"It's been hidden in the back of my dad's closet for years," Brad explained, "He thinks I don't know about it, but I found it a long time ago while snooping around. When I saw the picture in your notebook this morning, I knew I recognized the face, it just took me a little while to place it." He glanced between Jet and the faces in the photograph. "That other woman, that's your mother, isn't it?"

Slowly, Jet nodded his head. "I guess the question now is: how did our parents know each other?" He sighed and refolded the photograph. "And there's only one person who might be willing to tell us."

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We were all quiet during the ride over to Janet Baxter's house—"all of us stewing in the newfound information"—devising possible scenarios for how these three people could have known one another. It was obvious that Brad's father was the shapeshifter hunter and Deirdre was the shapeshifter, but what was Janet's role in all of it? Was she a hunter too? And if Brad's dad was really hunting Jet's mom, then why did they all look so happy in the photo? Did he pretend to be her friend and then just stab her in the back? I glanced at Brad in my rearview mirror. He wasn't trying to do the same thing to us—was he?

I shook the distrusting thoughts from my head as I parked in front of a single story, white cottage. The four of us piled out of my Jeep—"each exchanging a worried look with another as we approached the front door.

Jet stepped forward and rang the doorbell, the sound bouncing off the inside walls of the house. Seeing how he seemed incapable of holding his fingers still, I took his hand in mine, hoping to help calm him.

The front door swung open and in the doorway stood a girl with curly, blonde hair who couldn't have been more than eleven. She stared at the four of us with a quizzical expression but didn't say anything.

"Umm, hi," I said to her as sweetly as I could, without sounding fake, "We're looking for Janet Baxter?"

The girl promptly shut the door in our faces. For a moment, I feared that I had just ruined our only opportunity, until we heard her shout, "Ma-om!" There was a pounding of footsteps from inside the house, and then another, softer pair of steps approaching the front door.

Once again, it swung open, but, this time, we were met by Janet Baxter. She scanned over our group before her gaze landed on Jet. Her eyes widened and she drew in a quick breath.

"Ms. Baxter?" I asked, feeling wary. Maybe we shouldn't have come here after all. "My name's Marina. And this is Brad, Fallon, and John. We were hoping we could come in and talk about an old friend of yours."

She glanced over to me for a second. "Of course," she said, but her voice came out as a whisper. She then moved out of the doorway, allowing us into her home.

Stepping inside, I immediately noticed her daughter's head poking through an open door, watching us. I smiled at her but she didn't smile back. I was never really a natural with kidsâ€"that was Skyeâ€"I still remembered how Jet's cousin, Kelsey, had taken instantly to my younger sister and basically avoided me.

"Ruth," Janet said, looking at her daughter, "go play in your room until I come to get you." The girl looked like she wanted to protest, but slipped behind the door, closing it.

Janet led us down the hall to a kitchen at the back of the house. She didn't talk to any of us, but gestured to the large table in the center of the room. It was only when we were all seated that she spoke.

With her eyes fixated on Jet, she said, "You look just like her."

I caught Brad's eye and I could tell that he was also wondering if this was a good idea.

"Like who?" Fallon blurted out, but Janet ignored her and continued to stare at Jet.

Deciding the only way we were going to get anywhere in this conversation was if I took a leap of faith, I leaned forward and asked, "You knew Deirdre, didn't you, Ms. Baxter?"

Her eyes flitted to me before returning to Jet. "You're her son, aren't you?"

There was a moment of silence before Jet responded. "Yes," he said and pulled Brad's photograph from his pocket, smoothing it out on the surface of Janet's table. "We were hoping you could tell us about her." He slid the picture over to her place setting.

She gazed down at the photo in front of her, a sad smile tugging at her lips. "She went by Deanna back then, Dee for short," she whispered. Fiddling with the edges of the photograph, she continued, "As I'm sure you know by now, this was her, this was me," she paused, taking a deep breath in, a new emotion slipping in with the air, "and thisâ€"this was Nathan Richter."

Nathan Richter. The unknown man. The one who had the restraining order against him. The one we suspected had brought Deirdre to the shapeshifter prison. He and Brad's father were the same person.

"Richter?" Brad interrupted, frowning.

Janet nodded.

Brad didn't say anything after that, but I knew what he was thinkingâ€"what we were all thinking. Richter wasn't Brad's last name. His last name, and the one his father claimed to have today was Glenn. So which was the alias: Richter or Glenn? And when and why did Brad's dad change his name?

"Deanna and I had been living in an apartment together for about a year before she met Nathan. We were inseparable. We went out together all the time, I even helped her get a job in my company," Janet began, "We met Nathan in a self-defense class that Dee had insisted on taking. She was always concerned about being able to protect herself."

I could understand where she was coming fromâ€"and I'm sure Fallon could tooâ€"on the run from the tribe and hunters? Who wouldn't feel the need to protect themselves?

"Anyway, he was very charming of course," she continued, "and Nathan and Dee hit it off immediately. They went on their first date later that week, and after that things seemed to progress very quickly."

She smiled to herself. "I had never seen her so happy before. She was clearly in love, and I didn't even mind that I didn't have someone. Nathan charmed me too. He made a point of getting to know me, and it wasn't long before I would have called him one of my best friends too. He was the kind of person you always wanted to be around. Soon, where Dee and I had been two-of-a-kind, Dee, Nathan and I became the three musketeers. We did everything together. We went to bars together, we went to the movies together, we took trips to the beach together, we sat home and played board games togetherâ€"everything. It was probably one of the happiest times in my life.

"But then things changed. She came home one night in tears. They had a fight, and suddenly Dee was afraid of him. She wouldn't say why but told me she didn't want him coming around anymore. But he would still show up. So I convinced her to get a restraining order against him. When that didn't stop him, she ran away, and I never saw her again. He disappeared soon after that.

"Andâ€" she looked like she wanted to say moreâ€"that there was something she was leaving out of the storyâ€"but wasn't sure if she should, "and that's all there is."

I could tell that Jet didn't believe her for a second. The way she tensed as if the real story was too difficult to remember, and how she fidgeted in her chair, and how she refused to look Jet in the eye, all gave her away.

Very slowly, as if choosing his words one at a time, Jet asked, "Do you know anything about shapeshifters?"

I could have sworn her eyes shot up faster than a speeding bullet. But there was something in her eyes that made me even more waryâ€"fear.

After a moment, she closed her eyes and sighed. "After what happened, I swore I would never get involved again." Lifting her head, she stared at Jet again. "You really are your mother's son, aren't you?"

Jet nodded, a sad smile tugging at his lips.

Janet glanced around at the rest of us around her table, as if she'd just realized we were there.

"It's okay," Jet said pointedly, "They know."

Janet's lips thinned before she turned back to Jet. "Are you a German Sheppard too?" she asked innocently.

He shook his head. "No," he told her, "I'm a wolf."

She smiled. "Dee would have liked that," she said, "would have thought it'd be easier to protect yourself." She sighed again, and then launched into the unabridged version of the story.

"It wasn't a coincidence that we met Nathan that day. He hunted shapeshifters, and he'd gotten a tip that there was a shapeshifter living in our apartment building. At first, befriending us was just a way for him to get into the building, but then he and Dee started dating.

"The night she came crying was the night she told me she'd discovered he was a hunter. She didn't think he knew about her, but, like I said, she was scared so she tried cutting him out of her life. I think that's when I realized he truly loved her. He kept coming back to her—he didn't understand what he'd done to upset her—and, truthfully, I think she liked that he returned. She loved him too.

"The last night I saw her, Nathan had come over. He had decided to tell her the truth—the whole truth—about shapeshifters and what he did. I guess he thought she'd understand but she was clearly upset by what he told her. He explained how it was his mission to find the shapeshifter in our building, how he'd finally discovered who it was, and how once he was done with this job he wanted to run away with her. He thought I was the shapeshifter. Dee tried to convince him he was wrong—that it wasn't me—but he didn't believe her, mistaking her reaction, thinking she was just in denial. Until, she proved it to him. She shifted in front of him. He was shocked. When she shifted back she tried to explain to him that shapeshifters weren't the monsters he was raised to think they were, but he was too confused and surprised. I think his emotions were all over the place—knowing he should hate her, but not being able to because he was in love with her. So he left. Dee was terrified. She packed her things, waited until I got home to say goodbye, and then disappeared. I haven't seen or heard from either of them since."

There were tears in her eyes when she finished. I could see the raw emotion she still felt about all that had happened to her.

She wiped her eyes before she looked back up to Jet. "She found out that same day, you know," she said, "and she was going to tell him."

Jet frowned. "Tell him what?"

Janet tilted her head, a soft smile on her face. "That she was pregnant."

Brad practically lunged into the conversation. "Wait, you're saying that this man, Nathan Richter," he pointed to the old picture, "this man in the photo here, is John's birth father?"

"Yes."

23. Repercussions

****I am so so so so soooooooooooooooooooooo sorry that it has been so long since I updated. While I did have trouble writing this chapter, there was no way it should have taken me over a month. I'm really, truly sorry. I hoped everyone enjoyed the last chapter though and thank you to anyone who wrote a review. I want to start getting chapters up more frequently again, but I'm not sure if that is going to happen in the next week. If not, then I promise it will be the week after that. I've been trying to sort through everything that needs to happen between now and the end of the book, and it is proving to be more complicated than I anticipated but I really can't wait to share it with you all! Don't worry though, I still have about four more chapters after this one already planned so there will be plenty to read. Wow, sorry for the rant. I just wanted to make sure you were updated on what is going on with this story. Anyway, the writing below this is what you guys really want so I hope you like this chapter and that it was worth the wait!****

The revelation that Jet and Brad were half-brothers was not a pill swallowed smoothly. It got caught in my throat, causing me to choke multiple times before finally settling in the stomach where it caused an ache so deep I wanted to plunge my fist down my throat and fish it out myself. While I wavered back and forth between denial and shock, I wondered how Jet and Brad weren't going into cardiac arrest. Neither of them moved or said anything on the way back to my house. More than once I considered stopping at the hospital before going home, just to have someone make sure they were both alright.

Finally I decided that they were deep in thought just as I was, and it was best to leave them be. I could only imagine what would come out of my mouth if someone asked me my opinion of the revelation. Something along the lines of me having kissed both Jet and Brad would definitely come out. That I knew they were brothersâ€"well, half-brothers, but stillâ€"just made that information sound worse. I couldn't help but compare it to a guy pursuing both me and Skye, and that thought alone made my head hurt.

Pulling into my driveway, I glanced sideways at Jet. He was staring ahead into the woods, but was obviously watching something else. Most likely replaying Janet's words in his head. I suddenly wondered if I was right to push him to keep looking into his mother. Yes he discovered who his birth father is, but he also discovered that he is a shapeshifter hunter. My heart dropped to my stomach when I realized what that meant.

Jet could never tell Brad's father that he was his son too. Nathan knew that Deirdre was a shapeshifter and he would automatically be suspicious of anyone who approached him claiming to be a child he'd had with her. And while Brad had accepted me as a shapeshifter, that didn't mean his father would do the same thing. If he couldn't accept the woman he supposedly loved, how could he accept anyone else?

The back doors of my car slammed shut in sync. Somehow I had missed both Brad and Fallon getting out of the back. The sound woke Jet from his daydream and he moved to get out as well. I caught him by the arm before he could go anywhere.

"You okay?" I asked.

He closed his eyes for a brief second before looking up at me.

"Honestly? No."

I leaned in and planted a quick kiss on his lips. "How 'bout now?" I smiled.

His lips parted to smile back at me. "Better."

"We'll get through this," I told him seriously as I took his hand in mine.

"I know."

Climbing out of my red Jeep, I turned to face Brad—who was having his ear talked off by Fallon. I was surprised he hadn't snapped at her yet, but I guessed he was just as numb inside as Jet was. I could tell Fallon wanted a response out of him, any kind of response, even if that meant him yelling at her. He didn't though.

"I think I'm gonna head home guys," he said, looking up at me. Almost involuntarily, his eyes shifted to Jet.

"Alright," Fallon said, "I'll see you tomorrow then?"

He nodded, turning his back to us and heading to where his own car was parked on the street.

"Brad?" I called after him.

He turned, eyebrows raised slightly, waiting for me to keep talking.

"Don't forget to keep an eye out for those new hunters, 'kay?" Despite what we'd just learned, we couldn't forget about our possible other problem.

He nodded again before trudging through the grass towards the street.

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On a bright side, the news that Jet and Brad were half-brothers meant Brad could no longer ignore me. We were going to be a part of each others' lives no matter how much one of us didn't want that. But, I also knew that he didn't really want me out of his life, he just wanted me in it in a different way—a way that wasn't possible.

When Brad approached me, Jet and Fallon the next morning, I knew that our friendship would survive, for better or for worse—which, according to the prophecy was a necessity if we wanted things to work out.

Not that things were suddenly easy. I couldn't help but notice the look on Brad's face every time Jet and I stood closer than necessary or bounced sentences off of each other. It was like someone had put his favorite dessert in front of him only to let him watch someone

else eat it. But of course I wasn't Brad's favorite dessert—it was just that the longing and simultaneous resistance was so evident on his face.

Something else that had become blatantly obvious was Fallon's desire for Brad. She perked up every time she saw him, and always made a point of talking to him whenever he was near. She almost reminded me of Bella when she'd been crushing on Brad—but not quite. Fallon was much more subtle about her pursuance—most likely because she didn't want to lose her tough persona.

I wondered if Jet had distinguished between Fallon being nice and pushing herself towards someone. Probably not—in my experience, guys weren't the best interpreters of a girl's intentions. But, to be fair, I had been the one last year who hadn't realized Jet liked me as more than a friend. Besides, it didn't matter whether Jet noticed. What really mattered was Brad's reaction. While with Bella he had been cold, dismissive, even hostile, he wasn't any of those things with Fallon. He responded to her every time, and maybe it was my imagination, but he seemed to gravitate towards her whenever all of us were together. It was possible, however, that he only did that because he saw her as a fellow outcast. Me, I preferred to view his actions romantically. And not just because I chose Jet over Brad and I felt bad, but more because Fallon and Brad deserved to be happy, and why not be happy together? It also wouldn't hurt for two brothers to not be pining over the same girl.

Just then, someone at the end of the hall caught my eye. His brown hair was slightly longer than I remembered, but then again, it had been a few weeks since I'd last seen Tanner. He stared back at me and yet he didn't seem to be surprised to see me there. No doubt the tribe had already sent word to his father that I'd escaped. I hoped he knew that if he—or anyone in his family for that matter—tried to take me back to the tribe, they were going to meet one hell of a fight. I braced myself for a confrontation that never came. Tanner just nodded and continued after a friend. Hmm, maybe I didn't have to worry about the tribe—for now.

"Marina?"

"Huh?" I turned my attention back to my own friends, realizing they had been talking to me while my mind circled the possibility of further threats.

"Did you hear what Brad just said?" Fallon asked, narrowing her eyes at me.

I glanced between each of my friends. "Uhh—..no?" I answered honestly, smiling and raising my eyebrows at Brad.

Fallon rolled her eyes at me.

"Sorry, what were you saying?"

"I said that you have to make sure that you and Jet—and the rest of your family for that matter—stay away from Hollister Avenue this afternoon," Brad repeated.

"Why?"

"My dad, some hunters and I are supposed to go on a hunt in that area," he explained, "And I obviously don't want to end up hunting you."

I snorted. "Yeah, that wouldn't be good," I said, glancing at Jet, "We'll stay away."

"I also checked for red auras in the hunters last night," Brad said, "but none of them had one."

My smile deflated. Although I had hoped that I was wrong about the sorcerers infiltrating the huntersâ€"cause that would be a really bad thingâ€"I had also kind of hoped that I was right about it, if only for the sake of being right.

"But there also were only about five of the new hunters at my house last night," Brad added.

"Only five?" I asked.

He nodded while Fallon rolled her eyes again.

"That's what he just said, wasn't it?" she pointed out.

"Yeah, the rest weren't there. My dadâ€" Brad paused, his eyes finding Jet, "â€"ourâ€" Jet looked away from him, "_my_ dad, asked that they come with him to scout an area for their next hunt. I'll have to check the rest as they come in and out."

"They're not staying at your house?"

Brad shook his head. "No, I think they're staying in an apartment complex or something. I'm not really sure." He looked down slightly, frowning. "I'm not in the loop as much as I was before I disappeared for a weekâ€"you know, without a good explanation."

I looked away as I felt my cheeks heat up in embarrassment. That was my fault. When I lifted my gaze again, I was surprised to see Grace walking down the hall towards us. And she wasn't alone. Her cousin, Kayleigh, who we'd met at the funeral the other day, was with her. I had to admit that I didn't expect to see her back in school so soon. But then again, that was Graceâ€"she couldn't be away from the gossip for too long.

The only problem was that when she approached, our conversation fell dead. While I'm sure she attributed our sudden silence to an awkward don't-know-what-to-say-to-someone-after-their-parent-dies thing, we just couldn't think of a topic other than the new hunters and the possibility of sorcerers among them. And we certainly couldn't talk about either of those in front of Grace and her cousin.

Fallonâ€"thank goodnessâ€"was the first to start thinking on her feet. "You're Kayleigh, right?" she asked, looking over to the girl standing beside Grace.

The blonde haired girl smiled at Fallon. "Yeah, sorry I don't remember your name."

"Fallon," she said, "and this is Brad, Marina, and John."

"Right," Kayleigh said, pointing at me, "We met the other day."

"Kayleigh is going to be staying with us for awhile so she'll be in school here too," Grace explained, then glancing between Fallon and I, added, "Funny huh? That both of us have cousins who have moved to the area?"

I frowned for a second before remembering that the cover story we had come up with for Fallon was that she was my cousin visiting from the East Coast. "Yeah," I said hastily, "funny."

Tommy joined us soon after that, followed by Connor and Annie. For the ten minutes remaining before the start of class, we mostly talked about the upcoming Coast Con.

"I heard that the band they picked is the better than any of the others we've managed to get," Annie said.

"Sometimes I just wish they'd tell us who the band is," Grace said, "I mean, what's the point of keeping it a secret?"

"It's all for the surprise. It makes the concert that much better," Tommy said.

I didn't contribute to the conversation much. Neither did Jet. I was growing increasingly concerned about him. He hadn't said a single word to me—or to anyone—all morning. When the bell rang to signal the start of homeroom, I gave Jet a peck on the cheek. "Are you okay?" I asked.

He gave me a non-committal smile and, without a word, headed off in the direction of his class while I turned and followed Brad in the direction of our English class.

Jet said all of two words to me during lunch and the classes we had together afterwards. I kept trying to talk about his classes, about the concert, even going as far as to ask about our date the next night—a date that I was starting to wonder would still happen. If Jet refused to talk to me then how could we spend a romantic night together? He didn't even comment when I received a note asking me to stop by the principal's office at the end of the day.

When I tried to speculate with him about why the principal wanted to talk to me, he only shrugged or muttered "maybe." As we walked together to my lockers after our last class, I decided I had had enough.

"Look," I said, my irritation pushing to the surface, "will you please just talk to me?"

He looked up at me, surprise in his wide eyes.

"I know you're upset about this whole Deirdre-Nathan-Brad-being-your-half-brother thing, but please don't push me out. Just talk to me."

He stared at me, silent. Finally, I turned my back to him, thinking he wasn't going to answer—that it was no use—he would talk to me

when he talked to me. I walked down the hall towards the principal's office. I hadn't realized that Jet was following me.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked, his voice low and quiet.

I turned around again. "Anything," I told him, "Tell me how you're feeling—what you're thinking."

"I'm—I'm angry," he said after a long pause as if just recognizing the emotion himself, "How could he do that?"

I frowned slightly. I wasn't following.

"How could he hunt her down like that?" Jet asked, his voice growing in volume, "He actually hunted her down for God knows how long before he captured her and threw her in that prison to die."

I swallowed hard, reaching for Jet's hand but was unable to grasp it.

"How could he do that?" Jet said again, "He loved her. That would be like me sending you to your death. I would rather die myself than do anything to harm you. How could he possibly put her in there knowing what would happen to her?"

"I don't know," I whispered.

Jet clenched his fists. "I wish I could just find him and ask him how he could do that to her. I wish I could find him and just tear him apart."

I gently put a hand on his shoulder. "I know," I said softly, trying to console him, "but you know you can't. If he hunted your mother what's to stop him from hunting you?"

Jet tensed at my words. "You're right," he said, with more conviction than I liked to hear, "There's nothing stopping him."

We had arrived at the door to the principal's office by now and I took his hand, squeezing it. "Will you wait out here for me?" I asked, "I don't think I'll be long. Then we can talk about this more."

He sighed and plopped down in a chair that was stationed outside the closed door.

"I'll be right back," I said, before pulling open the door and stepping into the office.

"Ah, Marina," the new principal said looking up from his computer as the door slowly shut behind me, "Come in. Take a seat."

I did as he instructed, sitting down in an uncomfortably hard chair in front of the large wooden desk. I didn't say anything.

"I'm glad you were able to stop by," the principal continued on as if she had said something, "I believe you are friend's with Grace Wang, aren't you?"

Again, I didn't answer.

"Such a shame what happened to her father," he said, "Horrible thing, an animal attack." He paused and looked up at me. "There aren't really very many of those around here are there?"

I raised my eyebrows, chewing on my bottom lip a bit. What did he expect me to say about this?

"I mean there aren't supposed to be very many wild animals around here are there? No bears or wolves or anything?"

Why was he talking to me about this? It was like he thought I knew something about Principal Wang's attack—which I didn't. I wasn't even home yet when it happened. How could I?

He smiled at me. "Of course, I'm sure you already know that. It was probably just a lost mountain lion or something—strayed too far from home," he readjusted himself in the chair behind the desk, "Anyway, I wanted to talk to you Marina to ask you about your brother."

"My brother?" I asked, finally finding something semi-worthwhile to say.

"Yes," the principal said, "I was hoping you could ask him and his band to play as the opening act for the concert on Saturday."

"His band?" I repeated, probably not sounding like the A student I was. But, then again, in my defense, I wasn't even aware of the fact that Cole had a band.

"Yes, normally I would have asked sooner, but the other band had to cancel so we're kind of last minute. Will you ask him? Or at least put me in touch with him?"

I was still slightly stunned by the idea that Cole had created a band. I never knew him to be dedicated to anything but his computer. "Uhh, sure," I said, "I can ask."

"Great," the principal said, standing up as I did the same, "If you could let me know tomorrow, that would be great. Need to get everything in place, you know."

He smiled at me but I had trouble smiling back. Despite his charm and pep, there was still something about him that didn't sit well with me.

"Well, you better go get some homework done," he said, "I'm sure, as a junior, you have a lot to do." He gestured towards the door which I practically ran for. I had never wanted to get out of school more than I did then—expect perhaps when the siren had taken over the town.

I walked out of the office, holding the door open for a father who seemed to be the principal's next appointment. The man entered the office and closed the door behind him without even a glance in my direction. I turned to my right, expecting to be able to tell Jet about what the principal said to me, only to find the seat he'd occupied empty. Frowning, I took out my phone and texted him, asking him where he'd gone, before sticking it in my pocket. I looked up and

down the hall but the only head present was a scruffy blonde one.

"Brad!" I called but he didn't respond. It seemed like he was staring at me as I walked over to him. The closer I got the more I realized he wasn't staring at me but at the closed door behind me. "Brad?" I asked again, finally getting his attention.

He snapped his head in my direction. "Oh, hey, Marina," he said, but then looked back at the office door.

"What is it?" I asked, following his gaze.

"Nothing," he said, still staring.

I raised my eyebrows at him. It definitely wasn't nothing.

He noticed my expression and gave in. "That man who just went into see the Principal, I think I've seen him before."

"Where?"

"Not sure."

"Does he have an aura?"

Brad shook his head. "No," he answered, then turns to look at me, "What did the principal want?"

"He wants Cole's band to open for the Coast Con on Saturday," I told him, "I didn't even know Cole had a band."

Brad gave a dry laugh and gestured for us to walk together. I glanced back at the empty chair Jet had been sitting in and frowned before nodding to Brad and following him around the corner.

"This new principal really knows everything, doesn't he?"

"Yeah," I said slowly, "It was weird: he mentioned Principal Wang's attack."

"He did?"

I nodded again. "And the way he brought it up—it was like he was trying to get a specific reaction out of me."

"A reaction?" Brad asked, "Like what?"

I shrugged. "No idea. It was almost as if he expected me to know something about it."

"That's weird."

I laughed and pulled my phone back out but Jet hadn't texted me back. "You haven't seen Jet, have you?"

Brad frowned. "Yeah, he passed by me about five minutes ago," he told me, "He said you were meeting him in the parking lot."

I stopped walking. That wasn't true—"Jet knew that"—I had asked him

to wait for me. Why would he lie to Brad?

Stopping in front of me, Brad turned back. "You weren't meeting him in the parking lot, were you?" he asked.

Slowly, I shook my head.

"Then why would he say that?"

I moved my gaze to look up at Brad, a thought springing to my mind. I hoped I was wrong. "I thought you were going on that hunt with your father."

Brad shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "I was but then my dad called and said he already had too many of the new hunters interested inâ€"you're not worried about the new hunters, are you?"

I began walking quickly in the direction of the parking lot, Brad following in my wake. "We need to get there," I said firmly, "now."

Catching up with me, Brad asked, "Why? I warned you guys to stay away from that area this afternoonâ€"|" he paused, his mind making the connection mine already had, "He wouldn'tâ€"you don't thinkâ€"do you?"

I locked eyes with Brad for a moment. "I do."

Jet was going to confront his fatherâ€"in the middle of a hunt. And he was going to get himself killed.

24. Leading Light

****So I kept my promise! Another chapter and it is still that "next week" I was talking about! Thank you to those who reviewed and right now I want to put out a special thanks to **_ObsessedwReading_** who not only reviews every chapter but is almost always the first person to review. Thanks! Also I'm hoping to have another chapter up within the coming week. And now onto the next chapter! Enjoy!****

The two of us sprinted down the halls, ignoring any funny looks we received as we passed by fellow stragglers, and out the doors to the student parking lot. Brad had his car keys out of his pocket before I could even think to look for mine. Hollister Avenue was fifteen minutes away if I ran and only ten if we drove. I was hoping that Brad would cut that time to five. We ran to where his car was parked in the lot and were racing towards the exit even before both our doors were closed.

I cringed when I noticed there was still a line of cars waiting to exit the school. I hadn't thought that people would still be trying to leave from the normal day. But this didn't stop Brad.

I gripped the edges of the bottom of my seat as he drove, horn sounding down the opposite side of the street, past the line of cars, many of whose drivers flipped him off, and out onto the road before the security guard directing traffic could figure out what was happening.

He sped down streets, completely ignoring any speed limit signs and, at one point, a stop sign. At this rate we were going to make it to Hollister Avenue in less than five. I began tearing clothing from my limbs, tossing my socks to the floor and pulling my pants down past my thighs.

"What the hell are you doing?" Brad yelled, frantically looking between me and the road.

"The only way we're going to find Jet before the hunters do is by using scent, and, no offense, but human noses suck," I said as my pants fell around my ankles and I started to work on my shirt, my fingers practically shaking. Oh why had I chosen to wear a button-down one today?

"You can't shift in my car!" Brad exclaims, his eyes now remaining on me longer than they did on the road.

"Pay attention," I snapped as I shimmied my arms out of the sleeves of my shirt, "and why not?"

"Your claws will tear holes in the seats."

"Are you serious?" I asked, reaching around behind my back for my bra strap, "Jet could be killed and you're worried about the interior of your car?"

Brad flinched at my words. "Well, when you say it like that..."

"If it makes you feel any better I'll try to be careful," I said sarcastically, as I successfully unhooked my bra.

Brad's eyes wandered back to my nearly naked form.

I glared in his direction. "And eyes on the road mister," I warned.

Brad smiled slyly but kept his gaze focused firmly on the pavement ahead of us. "Not like there's anything there I haven't seen before," he whispered.

"Yeah, against my will."

He shrugged. "Eh, you would have let me see eventually."

"In your dreams," I told him.

He laughed. "Every night, babe. Every night," he said, still smiling. I smiled too, knowing he was trying to get a rise out of me and thereby distract me from Jet. Once again, I was thankful I hadn't lost Brad as a friend. I needed his jokingly pretentious manner around much more than I thought I would.

Making sure he indeed wasn't watching me, I quickly stripped off my remaining articles of clothing and shifted into my wolf form, which, I have to say, wasn't the most comfortable in the front seat of Brad's Charger. I heard Brad wince as one of my claws punctured the lining of the leather seat. Oops. So maybe he had a point.

"You can't just take off after I park the car," he said.

I shot him a look.

"What? We don't need the hunting party stumbling across two shapeshifters instead of one."

Of course I didn't say anything. It's not like I could.

"Just promise that once I park the car you won't take off," he said, slowing down and signaling that he was going to pull over into the shoulder, "or anytime after that...unless I tell you to run."

The look on my face must have told him that I wasn't going to follow any of his rules, no matter what he said. I was going to fix this my way.

"Please, Marina," he said, his voice softer, "I can't lose you again."

Just as he pulled the car to a stop, I heard the distinct click of all the doors in the car being locked.

I tried to press the button with my claw but after repeated failed attempts, I turned back to Brad. We were wasting time. I growled at him but he didn't move to open the doors, or even flinch for that matter.

"I mean it," he said, staring me down.

I rolled my eyes but nodded my head to signal that I had given in. Of course, I really hadn'tâ€”being ready at any moment to sprint after Jet.

Brad pulled a handgun out from under the driver's seat and unlocked the doors. Hoping out of the car, he glanced around before running to my side to let me out. I took off for the shelter of the nearby trees, listening as Brad crunched along behind me. It had begun to rain, slicking the dead branches and leaves scattered across the ground. As we drew deeper into the woods, the footsteps behind me softened, Brad taking care not to make any noise.

It didn't take long for me to pick up Jet's scent, having practically tattooed it into my memory the day I first discovered he was also a shapeshifter. The problem was that the trail his scent left was entwined with others that I didn't recognize, one of them I was assuming was that of his birth father.

I took off runningâ€”following the scent as it weaved through the trees and brush. Brad did his best to keep up, but it wasn't long before I knew I had lost him altogether, even despite his almost inhuman speed. Under any other circumstances I would have backtracked until we crossed paths again, but not now, not with Jet's life on the line.

When Jet's scent became so intermixed with the others, I skidded to a halt in a small clearing, thinking I was too lateâ€”that he had already confronted his father and been captured. But then I heard the snap of twig to my right and I silently ducked behind the brush. A few seconds later, the hunting party appeared: masks on, guns still

in hand and crouched low in predator mode.

"I'm telling you," one whispered, "I heard something over here."

Another hunter slapped him on the back of the head. "Even if it was one of the monsters, you've let it know we're here with your loud voice, moron!"

"I'm loud? What about you?"

If I hadn't been holding my breath, I would have laughed at the two. Clearly neither of them was Brad and Jet's father. These idiots had to be the new hunters from out of town. I wondered why the leader of the hunters would send guys like these to an area that has had a decent amount of shapeshifter sightings, especially since it was clear that they were inexperienced.

"Quiet!" a man in the front of the group commanded, his voice racked with irritation. It was a voice I recognized, having heard it used in a discussion over dinner in his dining room. This was Nathan.

It was then that my wolf ears picked up a sound the hunters could not have heard, unless they were standing directly beside it. A faint guttural sound—rhythmic but short. I knew the sound well, having issued the growl from my own throat on countless occasions. I risked a deep breath, sniffing the air and catching a load full of Jet's fur in my nostrils. He was close—real close.

Sticking low to the ground, I crept along the line of brush, never making a sound. If the hunters found me it wouldn't be because they had heard me. Coming around the other side of a patch of overgrown grass, I caught a glimpse of black tail, the body it was attached to hidden from view by a large browning bush.

"_Marina_."

I swiveled my head around but there was no one in sight.

"_Marina_," came Brad's voice, "_I know you can hear me_. _I'll distract them so you and John can make a run for it. Go to my house. It's closest and it'll be empty. Hide out there until I come back for you._"

I glanced over at Jet to see if he'd heard Brad's instructions, but his tail hadn't moved. Either he hadn't heard Brad or he was too focused on his father to pay attention to anything else. He probably didn't even know I was less than fifteen feet away from him.

"Check over there," Nathan barked at the others, giving up altogether on the notion of a silent hunt. A frozen hand clutched at my heart—he was pointing to the area where Jet was hiding. No, no, no, no, no. Where was Brad with this distraction?

No sooner had I thought the words than a gunshot rang out amongst the trees. For a second I thought my worst nightmare had come true—that a hunter had actually shot and killed Jet—but then the entire hunting party whipped their heads around and that's when I saw him.

Brad was standing behind the group, facing the opposite direction. His arms were outstretched, the shot gun in his hand having just recently been fired.

"Quick!" he said, sounding urgent, "He took off this way!" With that he sprinted away from the clearing, running deeper into the woods. The other hunters followed, holding up their guns with renewed fervor. Only Nathan hesitated. And for a moment I thought he wasn't going to leave. But then he glanced once more around the clearing before taking off after his son.

When I heard Jet growl again, louder this time, I reacted instinctively—lunging and landing on top of him before he could chase after Nathan, turning him from predator to prey. The great black wolf struggled beneath me but I held him down. I let my body become a paperweight to his loose-leaf. Finally when his efforts to escape died down, I rolled off of him, lying in the dirt beside him.

I shifted back into human form. "You know I couldn't let you do it."

He shifted back too. "That's why I didn't tell you."

"Except you didn't have to tell me," I said, "You forget that I know you just as well as you know me."

He lifted his gaze from the ground to look at me. "Like how I know you're going to tell me that I shouldn't go after my father?"

I made a face like I was weighing the options in my head. "Yeah—probably not the best decision."

"So why bother telling me?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Fine, I won't then."

We laid there in silence after that. I wasn't sure how much time had passed but I knew we could stay behind that bush forever. The hunters could come back.

"It's just," Jet started softly, "It's just the mere thought of what he did to my mother—of what he could do to you if he ever caught you—makes me want to rip his limbs off." I watched as his hands crushed the dirt into fine grains.

Gently, I reached a hand around to cup the side of his face, pulling it towards me. "Listen to me, Jet," I said, staring him right in the eye, "That's not going to happen. I'm much faster than any of them and we've got Brad on our side now. No one is going to get captured." I moved my thumb along the line of his cheekbone. "Besides, I don't think your mother would have wanted you to become a killer for her."

Jet leaned in closer and planted a lingering kiss on my lips. I blinked at him in surprise when he pushed back.

"What was that for?" I asked.

He smiled. "A thanks," he said, "for knowing me better than

anyone."

"Come on," I said, "We have to get out of here." I shifted as I stood up and Jet did the same. We snuck through the woods, hardly making a sound. A minute or two later, Brad's house came into view. I ran through the yard and bounded across the patio, recalling how the last time I was here it was crowded with people, most of them hunters. My claws clicked against the stone as I made my way over to the back door, praying it was unlocked. I shifted again and tried the handle: the door opened when I pushed against it. Jet shifted back as well and together we ducked inside the warmth of Brad's house. He followed me up the stairs to Brad's room.

"So this is Brad's house," he said, craning his neck all around to get a good look at the expansive foyer.

"He said the place'll be empty for the next few hours so we can hide out here."

Jet looked at me inquisitively. "And you've been here before?"

"Yup," I said, not really wanting to think about how the last time I'd been here was when Brad and I first kissed. Still, I retraced my steps down the hall, darting inside the room across from the one with the tapestry and the open balcony. I made my way over to the closet and threw open the doors. It shouldn't have surprised me that the space was a mess insideâ€"mine really wasn't much better.

I pulled a t-shirt and gym shorts from an overflowing cubby and tossed them to Jet. I was sure they'd fitâ€"Jet and Brad were relatively the same size, Brad being slightly taller. Of course there was no hope for me. Even the smallest of Brad's clothes would probably be big on me, so I just grabbed the first shirt I found and a pair of sweatpants off the shelf and pulling them on. The shirt while big, wasn't hanging off meâ€"it was the pants that were the problem. I pulled the drawstring as tight as it would go, tying a knot at the end to keep them snug around my waist and then rolled up the ends so I wouldn't trip.

Turning around I found Jet staring at me. "What?" I asked him, pursing my lips. He had this strange look in his eye.

He raised his eyebrows at me. "Nothing," he smiled and then stepped to the side, motioning for me to lead the way.

A smile creeping onto my face, I pushed past him and back down the stairs. I was on the bottom step when Jet caught me by the shoulder, his grip fierce.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Shh," he said, "I thought I heard something."

I followed his gaze to the front door, listening. Sure enough there was the scratch of a lock and key and the hush of voices coming from the other side.

"Quick," I said, taking Jet's hand and dragging him around the back of the staircase to a door underneath, "in here." Of course I didn't

know what was behind the door but I prayed that whatever it was it would not only be a good place to hide but someplace the people coming into the house wouldn't go. If Jet and I got caught, no doubt Brad would get caught too. And while I knew Brad was Nathan and Helen's only son, I didn't know what they would do to him if they discovered he was a traitor. I mean, Nathan did sell out the woman he loved and Helen shot me in cold blood.

It turned out that behind the door was a coat closet—a decent enough hiding spot. Not a second after Jet shut the door behind him we heard a click of a lock turning and the front door being opened. Footsteps filled the front hall, but how many I couldn't tell.

Jet and I huddled together in the back of the closet—behind all the coats—hoping that some of the more puffy winter ones would conceal us from view should one of the intruders open the door. His breath was light against the top of my head, fluttering a few hairs, and I was sure he could feel my heart beat against his chest just as I could feel his. We would somehow be able to talk our way out of this if we were caught? Who were the people in the hall? Brad had promised that the house would be empty so whoever they were Brad hadn't known they were coming which meant that they couldn't be hunters. Although, Brad had admitted that he didn't think he was as in-the-know as he used to be.

"Why are we here again?" a younger man's voice flitted through the slit underneath the door, "There's no one home. Everyone is on one of their hunts."

"That's why we're here now," a second man, an older one, said.

"Right. What exactly is it we're looking for again?"

"A weapon."

"Which one? There are a decent amount of weapons in this house."

The second man didn't answer. I held my breath as his footsteps passed the closet door.

"Let me guess: need to know?"

There was still no response from the older man.

"I don't understand why there's all these secrets," the younger man continued, "I mean, shapeshifting monsters really exist, what could XP be keeping that's more horrifying than that? Right?"

XP? The initials rang a bell in my head. I knew I had heard or seen them before, but where?

"I don't know," the older man finally answered, although I got the feeling he was being less than honest with his partner, "All I know is that we were given instructions to get this weapon and get out before the hunting party returns."

"Do you really think they'll catch one?"

"No. These shapeshifters are smart. That's why XP is having us take

all these precautions."

That was when it clicked. XPâ€"that had been the signature at the bottom of the coded emails we found back at the shapeshifter prison. Whoever XP was, they were talking with the warden of the prison and also somehow commanding these intruders. But who were the intruders? They clearly knew about hunters and shapeshifters, but what else did they know? The first guy was definitely clueless but my gut told me the second wasn't as out of the loop as he claimed to be. And yet they couldn't be hunters if they were sneaking into Brad's house knowing no one would be home.

Very slowly, I pushed aside one of the jackets and stepped towards the closet door. Jet grabbed my hand, giving me a look that, even in the dark, I could tell said "what-the-hell-do-you-think-you're-doing?" I took his hand in mine, squeezing it reassuringly. I needed him to trust me. A bit unwillingly, he let go of me.

"But we need to catch them, right?" the first man asked, "That's why XP gave the hunters the orders to capture but not kill?"

"Yes," the second man said grudgingly, "Now will you please be quiet?" He muttered something else under his breath. I didn't think the younger man would oblige, but apparently he had some respect for his elders or authority or something because I wasn't able to make out a single sound from him.

There was a rummaging around in the kitchen before drawers were slammed and the older man said, "Got it. Let's go."

I waited until both pairs of footsteps had passed the closet door before quietly weaning it openâ€"just enough for me to catch a glimpse of the two men still standing in the hall. Before I lost my chance, I narrowed my eyes in their directionâ€"recalling their voices and mannerisms and now taking in the way each walked. The younger man's appearance didn't change at all. But, right before the two disappeared out the front door, a light materialized around the second man's body.

The front door slammed shut and I wasted no time in throwing open the one to the closet. I raced over to the windows beside the door and looked outside to where the two men were running down the lawn.

Once they were gone, I turned back to Jet, thinking about what I'd just seen and heard.

"What is it?" he asked, immediately recognizing my facial expression, "Who were those guys? What's wrong?"

The younger man was completely human. He didn't have an aura. But the older man had a red aura. He was a sorcerer. "I think we need to talk to Tommy."

25. Red-Handed

****Another chapter, yay! Sorry this took a little longer than I expected. I really wish I could have had it finished for you guys around Christmas. Thank you sooooo much to everyone who reviewed for**

the last chapter. And thanks to DreamWings for remembering how Marina doesn't know why Tommy was in the prisonâ€”I plan on addressing that in the next chapter. Anyway thanks again for the awesome reviews and I hope everyone has a very happy new year. Here's to 2014!**

The next morning I couldn't find Tommy anywhere. I knew he was in school because I had spotted his blue Civic in the parking lot when I pulled in, but the longer I looked for him the more I began to doubt that the car had actually been his. I mean, there are a lot of people who own Civics. But then I specifically remembered seeing the Stanford sticker on his back windshieldâ€”it's the only school he's ever wanted to go to for collegeâ€”and knew it had been his.

For a long time I was convinced that Tommy was only a good student because he knew he had to be to get into Stanford. Of course, then I got to really know him and discovered he just liked being a walking library.

Thinking about Tommy and Stanford made me realize that I hadn't done anything about college. I hadn't even thought about it, and I was in the second semester of my junior year. Nearly everyone else had already taken the SAT's and was forming a list of the schools they wanted to apply to in the fall. I didn't think I could even name five colleges in my life depended on it. What surprised me was that my mom hadn't mentioned college to me at all. She's always been a stickler for good grades but she hadn't brought up college or the SAT's to me since last summer.

Not that I wasn't grateful she'd held her tongue. What with the immersion of the tribe in the fall, the prophecy, being kidnapped, and whatever was going on with the hunters and sorcerers, I had plenty on my plate. I didn't think I could handle the added pressure of trying to get good SAT scores for colleges.

Rounding the corner of the last shelf in the library, I stopped and sighedâ€”officially out of ideas as to where Tommy could be. I pulled out my phone and texted him: Need to talk ASAP. But by the time the bell rang Tommy still hadn't responded to my text and I wondered if something had happened to his phone. Of course, in reality, only about five minutes had passed. I suppose I was a bit impatient.

I ran down the hall towards my AP Language class, knowing Mrs. Becker would chew me out for being late. I passed by Tommy's locker and skidded to a halt, my black boots squeaking on the linoleum floor. Taking a few steps backward, I stared at the metal door to his locker. There were three thin slits at the top, just like everyone else's. Last year Tommy had left me a note in my locker, asking me to meet him in the library. That, of course, had been before I'd found out he was a sorcerer. Actually, if I remembered correctly, that had been the exact day he admitted to not being human.

Glancing at the time on my phoneâ€”I was already late, what would another minute or two matter? I quickly pulled a piece of paper out of my bag and wrote down a note for Tommy to meet me in the library after school, even adding that it was urgent. I folded the paper and stuck it through the middle slit on his locker door. Hopefully he got the message.

I ran the rest of the way to my AP Lang class, not caring how much sound my boots made with each thudding step. I slowed to a stop

outside of the classroom, catching my breath for a second, before opening the door and stepping inside. Looking over to Mrs. Becker, I easily recognized her "not pleased" face.

"You're late, Marina," she said coldly.

I tried not to flinch or lower my gaze. I held my head high, trying to show my guilt instead of my embarrassment at being called out in front of the entire class. The last time that had happened had been the very first day of junior yearâ€”when Brad had gotten me in trouble by talking to me.

"I'm sorry," I told her seriously, "I'll be on time tomorrow."

"I hope not," Mrs. Becker said immediately.

I startled. Whatâ€”?

"Tomorrow is Saturday, Marina," my teacher explained.

The rest of my classmates stifled their giggles.

Tomorrow. Saturday. Coast Con. "Oh, right," I said lamely, blood rushing my cheeks. So much for not showing my embarrassment. My eyes find Brad but he's smiling too. He raises his eyebrows as if to say, "well, what did you expect with a comment like that?"

I shifted my gaze to my empty seat, trying not to hear the rest of the smiles that haven't left the room, and turned to make my way down the aisle.

"Oh, but hold on, Marina," Mrs. Becker said behind me.

What now? I turned around, desperately hoping she wasn't going to try and embarrass me further. "Yes?"

But she doesn't. She picks up a small slip of paper from her desk and hands it to me. "Principal Price would like to see you in his office."

Glancing down at the piece of paper, I murmured thanks and rushed back out the door. Of course the principal wanted to see me. He still needed to know if Cole's band could open the concert Saturdayâ€”I mean, tomorrow. Where had the week gone? If today was Friday Jet and I were supposed to go on a date tonight. Somehow I didn't think that was happening. What with finding out Jet and Brad were half-brothers and then everything that happened yesterday. Jet hadn't even mentioned it since he first brought up the idea on Tuesday before the funeral. Yup, no date for me.

Part of me deflated at the thought. I had been looking forward to a normal night with Jet. But, just as he said, we weren't normal. And after everything that happened this week, I felt like the universe was trying to remind us of that. We weren't normal. Our lives certainly weren't normal. So how could we possibly do normal things like go on a date?

I knocked twice on the principal's door and opened it only after I heard a cheery "enter" sound from the other side of the wood and glass. Stepping inside, I saw that Principal Price was seated behind

his desk, seemingly pouring over a stack of permission slips. I closed the door behind me.

He looked up as the door clicked back in place. "Ah, Marina," he said just as he did the day before. He motioned for me to sit down again. I did as he instructed, rubbing my arms a bit as chills raced around my body.

"Sorry to pull you out of class but I hoped you had an answer from your brother for me."

I nodded. "It's okay," I told him, squeezing my legs together to keep more heat in my body. Why was it so cold in here? Did he have the air conditioning turned on high? "Cole says he and his band can play tomorrow."

"That's great," he said, standing up and walking around to the other side of his desk.

When I realized he'd come to stand in front of me, I stood up too.

"I really think this concert tomorrow is going to be memorable. I'm trying to get the whole town to come out." He smiled at me, but something about the way his lips were turned up gave me the creeps. I still didn't know what, but my instincts kept telling me something was off about this guy.

It didn't occur to me until it was too late that I should have smiled back at him.

"Thank you so much for coming through like this last minute," he said, then added, "And thank your brother for me too."

"I will."

He holds out his hand for me to shake and I took it. I jumped a bit at his touch. Despite the cold air, I didn't expect his hand to be so cold. How was he not shivering? I swore I could even see my breath fogging up the space between us.

"You better get back to class. Don't want you to miss out on an excellent education," he said, winking at me.

This time, I forced myself to smile back, before practically running out of the office. I made a sharp right once outside and ran straight into a wall. Well, it wasn't a wall, it was a person—a person taller than me.

"Oh, sorry," I said, embarrassment flaring when I realized the person I had bumped into was a man—and probably a good-looking one given the hardness of his abs. "Excuse me." I step aside and then look up at him. All the color that had risen to my cheeks slid away as I stared up into his face.

"It's okay," he said, smiling at me.

I couldn't say anything. I just stared, eyes wide. Standing in front of me was the same guy who had broken into Brad's house yesterday—the one who was human.

When I didn't respond, he shuffled away into the principal's office. The principal's office. He went into the principal's office. This knowledge bounced around in my head for a second before I realized what it could mean. I darted to the door, trying to sneak a peek back in the room before the door completely shut, but I wasn't fast enough. Instead, I attempted to listen at the door before a teacher turned down the hall and reprimanded me for being out of class. I grudgingly made my way back to AP Lang, but slowed my pace as soon as I was out of eyeshot of the teacher in the hall.

How did Principal Price and the younger man who broke into Brad's house know each other? Was the principal working with the hunters? Or was he working for the sorcerers? Or what if he was a sorcerer? I wasn't sure of anything at the moment, but I did know that it was too much of a coincidence for me to see the same man sneaking into Brad's house and then visiting our new principal.

Somehow I had to find out more, and I had to start by getting a chance to check the principal for an aura. But how was I going to do that? I have never seen the principal walking the halls. All week long he's been locked up in his office, apparently making phone calls to parents and the superintendent—and, most likely, people helping with Coast Con—only making time in his schedule for you if he makes an appointment.

Again, I turned a corner and ran into someone. Man, I really needed to start watching where I was going—or maybe just get a few things off my mind. "Uh, sorry."

"Woah there," a familiar voice said, grabbing hold of me by one arm, "you okay?"

I looked up to see that it was Fallon I had bumped into. "What are you doing out of class?" I asked her.

She raised one eyebrow at me. "I could ask you the same thing," she countered, "But seriously, are you okay? You look like you just saw a ghost."

I opened my mouth to tell her about the guy I ran into outside the principal's office but she cut me off.

"Wait, you didn't actually see a ghost, did you?" she asked, paling a bit. "Do we know if ghosts are even real?" She cocked her head to the side, considering the possibility.

I shrugged. "I didn't see a ghost so I don't know if they're real or not. Never really thought about it before."

"Neither have I—until now."

"Something else to ask Tommy," I told her while she nodded her head in agreement.

"Is he meeting us this afternoon?" she asked.

By living with Fallon for the past week, I learned that keeping secrets from her are basically impossible. It's not that she's nosy, she just has a way of finding things out on her own. And it's not

like I mind her knowing thingsâ€"she is my friend after allâ€"it's just strange sometimes to go to tell her something and have her already know. When it happened last night, she reminded me of Eloise. Of course I didn't tell her that thoughâ€"she probably would have knocked me out.

"Don't know yet. I haven't heard from him. You haven't seen him, have you?"

She shook her head. "I don't usually see him until lunch time."

I then told her about my meeting with the principal and how the guy who went in after me was the same one from yesterday. This information caught her attention right away. She agreed that it could mean the principal is connected to the whole sorcerer-hunter thing, but she wasn't quick to label Principal Price as a sorcerer himself.

"If he's really a sorcerer then why is he working as a high school principal?" she wanted to know.

"How should I know? Are there even sorcerer specific jobs out there? Until I get the chance to check him for an aura though it's still a possibility," I insisted, "It's just a matter of getting him out of his office."

Fallon smiled slyly at me, her eyes lighting up with amusement.

"What?" I asked.

She continued to smile. "In my experience," she started slowly, "nothing gets the attention of an authority figure more than a little rule-breaking."

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Fallon and I had class together right before lunch, and, after fifteen minutes of passing notes, we had a good amount of troublemaking planned in order to get me in to see the principal again. Of course, it had been Fallon who'd come up with most of the plansâ€"me having never gotten a single detention in my life while she was practically one step away from becoming a delinquent.

We both watched our physics teacher pace the front of the room, lecturing us on inertiaâ€"something we had learned about in a previous class. Really, she should have just reviewed the term, but no, she didn't trust us to remember it so she was spending a whole ten minutes re-teaching us about resisting states of motion.

A few minutes more and she released us to complete a lab. Fallon and I rushed to a table closest to the teacherâ€"we wanted to be caught after allâ€"and immediately grabbed all the rubber bands out of the bin and stuffed them in our pockets.

"Umm, Ms. Greco?" Fallon asked, creasing her forehead in a look of almost-honest confusion, "We didn't get any rubber bands in our bin."

Our teacher looked up from her desk. "You didn't?" She seemed just as

puzzled as Fallon didâ€"only her expression was real. "I'm sure I put some in there before class."

"You must have missed a bin, because there aren't any in here," I said, cringing on the inside. Ms. Greco was going to forever hate us after what we were going to do to her.

Still frowning, she reached inside a drawer in her desk and pulled out four more rubber bands, handing them to me. "Here you go," she said, sitting back down, "that should get you through the lab." Little did she know that they wouldn't.

We waited until she was fully immersed in her own work, building the car we were supposed to for the lab, before Fallon and I exchanged looks.

"Now?" Fallon whispered to me.

I nodded. "Now."

Fallon pulled out one of the original rubber bands from her pocket, and, taking aim at our teacher's head, she shot it. But it went wideâ€"around the back of her head even so Ms. Greco didn't. Fallon reached for another while I also grabbed one. Letting go of mine, I watched it soar through the air and plop down on Ms. Greco's desk. She definitely saw that one.

"Whaâ€"?" she started to say and looked up only to get hit square in the nose by Fallon's rubber band.

Pursing my lips, I watched her face go from confused to angry. Yes! We were in trouble.

She pushed her chair out from under her desk and marched over to the two of us. "Can you tell me why you decided to sling rubber bands at me?" she asked, "Suppose one had gone in my eye. That was extremely immature of you, Fallon."

Wait, what? Fallon?

"Umm, she didn't do it, Ms. Greco, I did," I said, quickly speaking up.

She smiled sweetly at me. "That's nice of you to try to defend your cousin, Marina, but I clearly saw Fallon shoot the rubber band."

Crap. This plan didn't work if Fallon got sent to the principal and not me. Fallon may have been born in a shapeshifter tribe, but she was human which not only meant that she didn't have an aura but that she couldn't see the auras of others.

"No really," I said, recognizing that my tone of voice hinged on desperate, "it was me."

She ignored me this time and stared right at Fallon. "I think you should go and talk to the principal for a bit. Come on, I'll write you a note explaining what happened."

Fallon widened her eyes at me as she began to follow Ms. Greco

towards the hall. Her expression seemed to beg, _now what_?

I shrugged back. Now what indeed.

I watched as the two left the room, Ms. Greco returning to the class a minute later. With Fallon, I hate to admit, but my resolve to misbehave lessened. I was supposed to be the good student after all, not the one who the principal expected to find in his office every day. But I had to see the principal again. I had to know if he was a sorcerer. And getting in trouble was the only way I could think to do that.

So when Ms. Greco had returned to her work at her desk, I lifted a hand, rubber band poised to strike once more. Letting go, I watched as it soared across the room and hit her right in the chest. This time, when she looked up and met my eyes she looked really surprised.

"Marina," she said in clipped tones, "come here please."

I got up and walked over to her desk, hoping that my last shot had been enough to send her over the edge with me too. "Yes?"

"Why did you shoot this rubber band at me?" she asked, picking it up off her desk.

"Because I could," I answered as defiantly as I could manage.

She sighed and pressed a hand to her forehead. "I don't know what's come over you today, Marina. This isn't like you at all."

I know, I thought, now send me to the principal too.

She lifted her hand from her face and pointed to an empty chair beside her desk. "Sit here for the remainder of the period. There's only ten minutes left anyway," she said, "Both you and your cousin will receive zeroes on the lab."

"What?" I asked incredulously, "You're not sending me to the principal's office?"

"No," she said, "This isn't something you'd normally do. You're a good student, Marina. I'm not going to punish you so severely for one wrongdoing."

"Bu-butâ€" "

She pointed again. "Sit."

And the good girl in me sat. I couldn't think of anything else to do. Clearly, no matter what I did, Ms. Greco wasn't going to send me to the principal's office. I had to find another way.

Ten minutes later, when the bell rang signaling the end of the period and the beginning of lunch, I followed my peers out of the classroom to the dining hall. I found our usual table and sat down, barely acknowledging Annie, Grace, and Kayleigh who were already there. I stared around the room, trying to think of another way to get in to see Principal Price.

About a minute passed before Tommy approached the table, collapsing into a seat beside Annie. I could tell he'd already had a long day. Looking over to me, he smiled and nodded. I gave him a nod back, knowing he'd found my note and would meet me (and everyone else) in the library after school.

Jet slid into the seat beside me, slinging an arm over my shoulder. "How was physics?" he asked.

"Terrible," I muttered, not even turning to look him in the eye.

"Why's that?" He rubbed his hand over my shoulder. "What happened?"

"I didn't get in trouble," I said, then corrected myself, "Well, I did, but not enough?"

Even though I wasn't looking at him, I knew Jet was frowning at me.

"You didn't get in enough trouble?" he asked, clearly wondering if he'd heard me right.

I jerked my head down in a single nod. I had to find a way to get in trouble—real trouble—now during lunch. We couldn't wait until tomorrow to see if the principal was a sorcerer. The sooner we knew the sooner we could find out what was really going on and prepare ourselves for what's to come.

Jet leaned in closer to me and lowered his voice to barely a whisper. "Why are you trying to get in trouble? Does this have anything to do with yesterday?"

I gave him a half-smile. Jet always caught on to more when it came to me.

When I didn't respond, he didn't push the matter. I'd fill him in after I read Principal Price for an aura. Instead, he squeezed my arm and asked, "Anything I can do to help?"

Remembering what'd happened when Fallon tried to help—she still hadn't shown up to lunch—I shook my head. I didn't want Jet getting in trouble too.

"Okay." He took his arm back and started into the lunch in front of him.

I stared down at the tray. What was something I could do that would get me in enough trouble to be sent to the principal's?

The baked potato on Jet's tray looked good and my stomach growled at the thought. I should probably get some food for myself. That's when it hit me.

"Can I have this?" I asked Jet, pointing to the potato.

"Uhh, sure." He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess."

Grabbing the sliced potato, I pulled my knees up to my chest and

stood up on my chair, yanking the entire room's attention to me. I braced myself for the hazardous gossip that was sure to follow my actions.

"Food fight!" I yelled at the top of my lungs and then launched the potato at the nearest lunch aide, smacking her in the back of the head and causing chunks of potato to get caught in her hair.

Everyone froze. No one moved, everyone's eyes shifting around the room. It was nothing like what happens in movies.

The aide whirled around and narrowed my eyes at me. She marched over faster than I expected her tiny body to carry her. Her hand latched onto my arm and yanked me down off the chair. The grip she held on me was viselike and she didn't loosen it until we were standing outside the principal's office.

The door opened and Fallon walked out, not looking particularly happy, but when she saw me standing there with the lunch aide her face broke into a huge smile. "Go get 'em," she said with a wink.

"Got another one here for you, Mr. Price," the lunch aide said as she practically shoved me through the door. Once again I shivered against the cool air in the office.

If the principal was surprised to see me he didn't show it.

While the lunch aide explained what happened and showed the principal the remnants of the potato in her hair, I did as Tommy had taught me last year. I focused in on Principal Price and then slowly widened my gaze on him, remembering everything I'd learned about him. I stared, waiting for the flowing, red light to appear. But nothing happened.

The principal didn't have an aura.

"So, Marina," he said, "I think we need to talk about the consequences of your actions."

I slumped down in the seat across from him, thinking how I couldn't have said it better myself.

26. An Ordinary Day

Thank you thank you thank you for all the awesome reviews! And a special thanks to everyone who has been posting their theories in a review (Bluefire, CelticH2O, and DreamWings). I really love reading your guesses. All of you have figured out at least some part of the truth (I won't say whatâ€"I don't want to give anything away) which is awesome. Speaking of which, most of you think the new principal is evil so I wonder what you'll make of this next chapterâ€"enjoy! :)

The consequences of my actions turned out to be a week's worth of lunch detentions. I half expected the principal to ban me from the Coast Con tomorrow but he didn't even mention it. And while I wasn't exactly happy about putting a scratch on my perfect record, I was

thankful he didn't decide to suspend me either. I could only imagine what my mother would have said had I come home with a letter explaining I was suspended from school for three days after being absent for about three weeks. I was sure she would not take it well.

Thanks to my meeting with the principalâ€”something I could no longer understand why I had thought was so necessaryâ€”I missed the remainder of my lunch period. And by the end of gym class I could no longer contain the growls erupting from my stomach. It wasn't until Jet pulled a granola bar out of his backpack at the beginning of last period that my stomach noises softened. But by the end of the day the growls had started back up again.

One rumbled just as Jet and I entered the library together. His eyes glanced down at my stomach before moving up to meet my gaze.

"Sorry," he said, "I don't have another bar."

"It's okay," I said, "I'll be fine." But then another growl erupted and I grimaced.

Jet shot me a skeptic look but didn't say anything. "There's Tommy over there."

Scanning the room, my eyes settled on the boy sitting alone at a table far in the back. He had his nose in what looked like a very old book, which didn't surprise me at all. If I had to guess I would have even said that the book was his famous supernatural encyclopedia, something that had greatly helped us when trying to deal with the siren but had so far failed immensely with the prophecy.

He looked up from the passage he was reading when we approached the table. "Hey guys," Tommy smiled and then looking around asked, "Anyone else joining us?"

Jet and I took seats next to each other at the table. "Yeah, Brad and Fallon should be here soon," I said. Before the words were even out of my mouth, Brad and Fallon came through the library doors, immediately spotting us and walking over.

It was only after Brad had pulled a chair over and everyone was seated that Tommy asked the question I was sure had been bothering him all dayâ€”or at least since he got my message about this meeting. "Soâ€”" he started, drawing out the last syllable as he glanced around at each of my friends before letting his gaze fall on me, "Is this about the prophecy?"

I felt a pang of guilt hit my chest at the mention of the prophecy. Of course Tommy would assume I wanted to meet with him because I had figured out another line. But I hadn't. I hadn't even looked at the prophecy in three days.

"Not exactly," I admitted. Technically the whole issue with the hunters and sorcerers had started with the line Tommy had deciphered from the prophecy but that's also where it ended. Brad had been unable to find any auras surrounding the new huntersâ€”he had continued checking every person who entered his house only to report back each time that the hunters were humanâ€”and we were unable to

find any connection between the older man who we knew to be a sorcerer and the hunters, other than he'd broken into Brad's house to steal some sort of weapon. I thought I had been onto something when I bumped into the younger man who'd accompanied the sorcerer into Brad's home outside the principal's office but, as I explained to Tommy, my efforts were futile—the principal was not a sorcerer.

"So I sat in his freezing cold office wasting my lunch period for nothing," I huffed and my stomach gave another growl of protest. "No matter how much I don't like him, Principal Price isn't the bad guy—he's just some quirky administrator who likes the cold."

Fallon grinned at me. "You'd think he'd have come to California to get away from the cold."

But I didn't smile back at her. I was too busy watching Tommy. He was starting down at the wooden table as if it had come alive before his eyes. There was an expression of deep concentration on his face—one I had seen before—and it meant the gears in his mind were working on overtime.

"What is it?" I asked, leaning closer to him over the table.

When he looked up he narrowed his eyes at me, staring until they were wider than normal and I knew he was looking for my aura. "What if he wasn't trying to get away from the cold but create it?"

Even though I didn't see it, I knew from the tone of her voice that Fallon had rolled her eyes. "Yeah, with an air conditioner."

Tommy shook his head. "Not what I meant." He stared down at the table again, thinking. "I think you might be right, Marina."

"That the principal's not involved?" My heart sank even as I said the words, just waiting to hit the bottom when Tommy confirmed them.

But it leapt again when Tommy shook his head for a second time. "I think the principal might be a sorcerer."

"But how is that possible?" Jet asked, "Marina checked him. He didn't have an aura. And you were the one who told us that all supernaturals have an aura."

Tommy pushed his palms together, resting them on the wooden tabletop. "I know and that's true, but auras are naturally warm magic."

"Warm magic?" Jet asked, sounding skeptical and I was transported back to last year when a different group had sat around this table trying to figure out a different supernatural problem. Jet had had a hard time opening his mind to possibilities then and the blockage seemed to return at Tommy's words.

"Yes," Tommy said firmly, "Because auras are attached to a living body which, in most cases—even as far as supernaturals go—is 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit, logic follows that the aura, as an extension of the body, would also be warm."

"Okay, that makes sense," Brad said, nodding, "But that still doesn't

explain why she didn't see an aura on him. Auras aren't exactly something you can hide."

"True, unless you have a spell that conceals it for you."

I raised my eyebrows. "There's a spell that can hide your aura? A spell that can make you appear human to other supernaturals?"

Tommy grimaced. "Not that I know of," he admitted, "but that doesn't mean he couldn't have created one."

Everyone at the table jumped and I knew I wasn't the only one surprised by Tommy's words.

"What do you mean by 'create one?'" Brad asked warily as if he didn't actually want Tommy to answer his question.

"Spells don't just exist, at some point sorcerers had to have created themâ€"experimenting with words and motions and sometimes even objects to get the magic just so," he explained, "It takes time and practice but sorcerers are still creating new spells today."

"So, just to be clear: you think that not only is the principal a sorcerer but that he created his own spell just so he could hide his aura and keep people like us from knowing he's a sorcerer?" Fallon smirked. "Because that doesn't sound far-fetched at all."

Tommy turned his head from side to side as if casting Fallon's words aside. "Principal Price wouldn't be the first sorcerer to try to create such a spell."

"Just the first to succeed," I finished solemnly.

"Exactly," he said glumly.

"Tommy," I said softly, "I think it's time you told us what you were doing in that shapeshifter prison."

At first I thought he would refuseâ€"he seemed wounded, almost fragileâ€"but he didn't.

"My mother couldn't teach me how to use my magic," he whispered, "The magic of sorcerers and sorceresses are differentâ€"almost like two separate languages. And my father has never been in the picture, so my mother had to find me a sorcerer to teach me. My teacher, Master Preu, was strict and tough on me, but he taught me well."

"I wasn't the best with magic and Master Preu was an impatient man, but eventually I accomplished everything he asked of meâ€"|" Tommy swallowed hard. "â€"except for one thing. As a final test, Master Preu instructed me to create a spell."

"A spell for what?" I asked.

Tommy averted his eyes. "A spell to control other supernaturals," he sighed, "I'm ashamed to even admit that I tried. I tried to create the spell and please him, but nothing I did worked. When it became clear to him that I wouldn't succeed, he told me I'd failed him and he dropped me as a student."

"That's not right," I said.

"Which part," Fallon laughed dryly, "The controlling spell part or the student dropping part?"

I ignored her. "How could he ask so much of you?"

Tommy shrugged. "It's a part of every sorcerer's training," he explained, "The final test for every sorcerer is to create a new spell, usually of their teacher's choosing. Some spend their whole lives trying to accomplish the feat. Even if we can perform every known spell, we still aren't considered a Master Sorcerer in the eyes of the council unless we have created our own spell. So if Master Preu asked me to create a spell that would allow the person to control other supernaturals then he expected me to be able to do so. I'm the one who failed him."

"No," I said firmly, "He failed you."

He smiled up at me. "Thanks, Marina," he said, "but I'm not telling you this story for you to feel sorry for me. It's what the hunters at the prison wanted out of me."

"They wanted your psycho teacher?" Fallon asked.

Tommy shook his head. "No, they wanted to know how to perform the spell I created to control people."

"But they're not sorcerers," I said, "and you just said you didn't create the spell."

"I didn't," he said, "but that doesn't mean I wasn't close."

We were all quiet for a minute. I thought about what such a spell could do to the supernatural world—it would probably be worse than have ten Shiras running around.

"Did you tell them?" I asked finally. We had to know what we were up against. Whoever XP was he had influence over the prison and possibly over sorcerers and hunters in the area.

Tommy shook his head no but didn't say anything. I watched him for a moment—trying to read the emotions on his face, get a clue as to what he was thinking. But even though Tommy was my oldest friend, he wasn't my closest friend. And unlike Jet, I couldn't read his mind. There was only one thing I was certain of—Tommy wasn't telling us the whole story—he was hiding something from us, and I didn't know what or why.

"Great," Fallon said, "Now that that's settled, can we please get back to your crazy notions about our new principal?"

Tommy stared down at the table for a long minute before looking back up at me. When he did, he immediately launched back into his theories. "Okay, the point is the concept of an aura concealing spell has always been simple, but it's the execution that's the hard part. In order to make your aura disappear, you have to get rid of the warmth it feeds off of." He paused, glancing around at each of us. "Have any of you ever looked for an aura on a dead body?"

"No," we all said in unison except for Brad.

All eyes shifted to Brad.

"And what did you find?" Tommy asked, sounding very much like a seasoned teacher.

"There wasn't one," Brad answered.

"Right," Tommy nodded, "That's because when we die and our soul and magic leave our body our aura disappears with them. So the theory for the spell always stood that if one were to lower one's body temperature enough, we could temporarily make our aura disappear. Of course, no sorcerer ever succeeded without dying of hypothermia first."

"So you think that the principal found a way to lower his body temperature without dying?" Jet asked.

"It's possible."

Fallon cocked her head to one side. "You know what's also possible?" she asked, sarcasm dripping from his lips, "That he had the air conditioning on high."

"Fallon, did you touch his skin?" I asked.

She wrinkled her nose. "Ew, no. Why would I do that?"

"He shook my hand," I explained. "But his skin was cold—unnaturally cold—supernaturally cold. It wasn't right."

"Fine," Fallon huffed, "but this is still all speculation. We don't have any concrete proof."

I looked around at each of my friends and my determination to figure this out grew. "So we get proof."

//*/*

Of course I knew that actually getting proof was going to be easier said than done. We bounced around idea after idea, someone shooting down each one. The main problem was that if the principal was really a sorcerer powerful and smart enough to create a spell to hide his aura then it was highly unlikely that he would fall for any of our tricks. And, as Brad cleverly pointed out, we may not be able to see the principal's aura, but that didn't mean he wasn't able to see ours—he could already know that Jet and I are shapeshifters and that Tommy was a sorcerer.

So, finally, after over four hours of sitting around the table in the library, and at the bequest of Fallon, we decided to forget about our issues with the principal until Monday. As Fallon reminded us all, tomorrow was the Coast Con, and she was very eager to experience her first concert. I was actually looking forward to an afternoon of music too. Part of me was even intrigued by how good—or how bad—Cole's band would be. Whichever it turned out to be, I certainly didn't want to miss it.

The temperature outside the next day was just right—not too hot and

not too coldâ€”something I took as a good sign. I pulled on a pink and green floral patterned dress over my head, tying the front sash in a bow, and slipped on my jean jacket over it. I bounded down the stairs and into the kitchen to find Jet already waiting for me.

I pursed my lips as I stopped at the bottom of the steps, just staring at him. He was wearing his usual khaki shorts and a grey Henley top that pulled a bit across his shoulders, accentuating the muscles in his chest and arms.

His face broke into a smile when he saw me. "You look incredible," he said, taking my hand and pulling me against his chest.

I could have said the same about him. Laughing, I said, "I didn't do anything special."

"I know," he said, "that's why you're incredible. You're always beautiful."

I couldn't help itâ€”I blushed. How could I not? My really, really, really hot boyfriend had just told me he thought I was beautiful no matter what.

He leaned down, placing his lips on mine, and I quickly got lost in the kiss. It was short-lived though.

"Gah!" Fallon remarked as she walked into the kitchen, "Do you have to do that while I'm eating?"

"You're not eating," Jet growled to her as he rested his forehead against mine.

Fallon reached into the fridge and pulled out an apple, taking a big bite. Still chewing, she said, "Now I am."

I let out a long sigh as I stepped out of Jet's arms. "Happy now?" I asked, glaring at her, but Fallon just smirked. "Do you know if Skye's ready to go yet? I'm supposed to give her a ride too."

"I'm right here," my younger sister said as she walked into the kitchen. She followed Fallon to the fridge, also pulling out an apple. "Ew, were they kissing again?"

Fallon nodded. "Long and slow and all romantic this time."

Since when had my sister and Fallon teamed up against me?

"Dis-gus-ting," Skye said, drawing out each syllable.

"Tell me about it," Fallon agreed.

"Oh please, you're such a hypocrite, Skye," I countered, "I've seen you make out with Zachary Rubin at least twice."

Skye only smiled. "He is a good kisser."

I rolled my eyes. "Are you ready to go?"

She took a bite of her apple. "I don't see why you need to drive me

to the concert. I could just fly there."

I turned to glare on her. "You know Mom doesn't want us shifting with all the hunters in the area."

Skye just raised her eyebrows at me. "And you can honestly tell me that you haven'tâ€"what do you sayâ€" 'gone for a hike?'"

I scowled but didn't answer her. She knew me too wellâ€"and what she knew most of all was that I loved being a shapeshifter. Even if my mom believed I hadn't been shifting, Skye certainly didn't.

"We should probably head over to the concert," Jet said, "There are probably already lines of cars waiting to park."

"True," I said, "Let's go."

The community park where the Coast Con was always held looked different this year. And it took being bumped into by at least three people before I realized why. The field was crowdedâ€"like actually crowded. Normally the Coast Con only attracts the town's younger generations, but that was quickly proving to be false this year. Residents of all ages walked the grounds, getting food or trying to find a good place to lay down their blanket for the concert. Somehow, the new principal had managed to make the Coast Con something for the whole community.

With all the people, it took longer than we expected to find the rest of our friends. But Grace and her cousin, Kayleigh, had claimed a grassy area in the center of the field big enough for all of us. Conveniently enough, Skye spotted her own friends only a little ways ahead of us and ran to join them. Even though I didn't see him, I was sure Zachary Rubin was among them.

Grace, Kayleigh, Annie, Jet and I sat down on the blanket, chatting as we waited for the concert to start. It wasn't long before Tommy and Connor joined us.

A hush fell over the crowd as Principal Price took the stage to announce the first act.

"Welcome everyone!" his voice boomed across the field, "And on behalf of this year's senior class, I thank each and every one of you for joining us today and supporting them with the purchase of your ticket. As we all know, a week ago today, we lost a very valuable person to this community: Principal Wang. Which is why I would like to dedicate this concert as a memoriam to him."

I saw that Kayleigh had her arm around Grace's shoulders. I glanced around at the rest of my friends. Not speaking to anyone in particular, I asked, "Where's Brad?"

But no one seemed to know.

"I thought he might be coming with you," Tommy said.

I shook my head.

"And now," the principal said from stage, "I'd like to present to you our opening act for the afternoon: C.A. Nation!"

The crowd stood and applauded as Cole and the rest of his band took the stage. Cole walked up to the mike, speaking into it.

"Hey," he said, "We're C.A. Nation and we'd like to play a couple songs for you. This first one's called 'Ordinary Day.'"

The music started and I watched Cole as he took a deep breath in and began reciting lyrics only the band knew. Jet put his arms around me and I held them close to my body. Together we swayed in time to the music. Putting Brad out of my mind, I let myself relax and just think about how nice it felt to be here. Here at the concert. Here in Jet's arms. Just here.

Right then I didn't have to worry about hunters, I didn't have to worry about sorcerers, and I certainly didn't have to worry about some stupid life-changing prophecy. I could've just stay there and sway to the music with Jet forever. It made me feelâ€¦normal.

And that was the beauty of it. Standing there in the crowd with Jet, we could have been any teenage couple. And when people looked at us that is exactly what they sawâ€¦a normal teenage couple. It was glorious.

Sure, it wasn't the perfect date I'd imagined for the night before but, for now, it would do. I leaned my head against Jet's arm and he hugged me tighter to him. I could feel his smile against the side of my head. We continued to sway even after Cole's band finished their first song and continued on to the next one.

I thought about how once everything was out of the way it could be like this forever. Just me and Jet. We weren't normal. We never could be. But we could have thisâ€¦these moments of bliss.

"Marina!"

Before they all come crashing down.

I turned and Jet unwound his arms, letting go of me. My eyes scanned the people around me but none other than the friends I came with were familiar and no one was looking at me like "yes, I'm talking to you." And yet, I could have sworn I recognized the voice.

"Marina!" it called again and this time my eyes zeroed in on the source.

Brad was pushing his way through the hoards of people, leaving many disgruntled ones in his wake. He didn't look like he had come for the concert. In fact, only one word could have described his appearance: disheveled. His hair was sticking out in odd places, there was a pen mark on his cheek that he definitely wasn't aware of, and there was this strained look in his eye that made me wonder if something inside him had snapped. Oh, and I was also pretty sure his t-shirt was on inside out.

"Marina," he panted, finally skirting around the last group of people to get to me, "Why haven't you been answering your phone? I've called you like five times."

I felt around in my pockets for my phone but it wasn't there. "I must have left it in the car," I said.

He groaned. "Of course," he said more to himself than to me. "Look, I need to talk to you."

Brad's entry, having caused quite a commotion from the other concert goers, immediately drew the attention of my other friends. Fallon was the first to Brad's side, Tommy coming to stand next to Jet, while in my peripheral vision I noticed Grace, Kayleigh, Annie and Connor on the outskirts of our little circle.

I let my eyes graze over his appearance one last time. "Brad, what are you doing?" I asked, "What's going on?" No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't seem to bite back the resentment that leaked into my voice. For once I had been having a good time, and Brad had to come along and ruin it.

He held up a piece of paper. No one could read what it said from the way it flapped in the wind but I didn't have to read it to know its sentences. I had already memorized every word.

"I figured it out," he said softly.

I glanced around us, meeting more pairs of eyes than I was comfortable with. We couldn't do this here. Too many people were staring. And, if I wasn't mistaken, Grace, Kayleigh, Annie and Connor had taken a couple steps closer to hear what we were saying.

Brad held out the paper to me, pointing to a line of the prophecy. "Here. This one. Itâ€œ"

"Brad, can we talk about this later?" I asked.

"No," he said firmly, "this is important."

"I know," I said, "Look, it's all important. But this isn't the place or time." I turned away, intent on enjoying the rest of the concert, but Brad grabbed hold of my arm and pulled me back.

"Ow!"

Brad let go of me immediately when he saw Jet take a menacing step toward him. But Jet wasn't the only one who stepped up.

"What is going on here?" Grace asked, crossing her arms over her chest, her eyes passing between me and Brad.

"Nothing," Fallon said quickly, waving Grace away, "Everything's fine."

Grace narrowed her eyes at Fallon looking almost as if she was trying to shoot laser beams at Fallon's head, but it was Connor who spoke.

"Yeah, right," he said, "and why should we trust you?"

"I trust her," Tommy said, responding to his best friend.

"Why?" Grace piped up again, "We've known her for less than a

week!"

"Less than a week and they already trust me more than you!" Fallon shot back, her hands fidgeting at her sides. I knew that if this kept up someone was going to get hit—and it wasn't going to be Fallon.

"Marina," Brad said again, reaching for my hand but Jet grabbed it first.

"She needs a break," Jet snapped, "Can't you give her one day without any stress?"

"Trust me, she needs to hear this—and so do you," Brad said in clipped tones.

Everyone was fighting with one another, firing back every chance they got. It made me want to sink to the floor, curl into a ball, and hope the crowd would kick me away. "Everyone, just stop!" I shouted over their bickering voices, "We came to listen to the music. Now can we please just enjoy the concert?"

"Good idea," Grace spat, taking my other hand and wrenching me away from Jet, Brad, and everyone else, "Let's just go and listen to your brother's band."

I was going to let her lead me away but Brad's next words stopped me cold.

"_Magus will bare them and fill the dark with fear_," he quoted.

I whirled around to face him, stuttering even though no words came out. How—how could—how could he just say it aloud like that? How could he speak a line of the prophecy in front of all these people? In front of my friends?

Off to the side I heard Connor say something about Brad having gone mad and I briefly wondered if perhaps he was right.

But then Brad closed the remaining distance between us, his ice blue eyes staring into mine, and I knew he wasn't crazy. He was scared.

"They're going to expose you," he whispered. He shot a look over to Jet. "_All_ of you."

27. Monsters

**As always, thank you to everyone who wrote a review for the last chapter. Thank you for your compliments and your speculations and for simply commenting. You always make my day :) Hmm, what to say about this chapter? Even though it has been coming for a long time, it was definitely one of the toughest to write. I cannot wait to hear what you make of it. So, without further ado, I give you

Monsters****â€|**

After everything we'd been through—and all the life-threatening situations—not once had I seen Brad scared. But there was no mistaking the pure fear etched across his face.

"Marina? What's he talking about?" Grace said, trying to get my attention. The worry in her voice only increased when I didn't answer. "Marina?"

I eased my hand out of Grace's grip and took a few steps closer to Brad. Despite the warm air surrounding me, I felt a cold sweep through my body as Brad's words repeated in my head. "What do you mean?" I asked, finally finding my voice. Jet and Tommy also leaned in closer to hear what Brad would say.

"The line says '_Magus will bare them and fill the dark with fear_', 'right?" Brad said again.

"Yeahâ€¦"

"Well, hundreds of years ago, the term _magus_ was used to describe one who sought to understand magic, aka â€œ"

"Sorcerer," I whispered, finishing Brad's sentence.

He didn't smile as he nodded and said, "Exactly."

I knew the rest of my friends were huddled around us as well, listening to every word, but I no longer cared. Just seeing Brad afraid had instilled a very real fear in me.

"From there I was able to deduce that the 'them' refers to shapeshifters because of the previous line and that, in this context, _bare_ means to uncover," he explained.

"But then couldn't the line just mean that a sorcerer will find shapeshifters?" Jet asked.

"That's what I thought at first but the second half of the line convinced me otherwise."

"The _fill the dark with fear_ part?" Fallon asked.

Brad nodded. "Yeahâ€œ"

"You mean it's not just talking about people being afraid of the dark?" Fallon laughed.

Brad tried to smile at her joke but with the seriousness of the situation it came out as more of grimace. "No," he said, "When I was reading the whole prophecy I began to wonder if maybe it is talking about _dark_ in the same way it talks about _light_."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning if _light_ referred an aura and _red_ referred to the specific red aura of a sorcerer then what if _dark_ refers to those without auras?" he said, "As in, humans?"

We were all silent as Brad's words sunk in. All around us the music from Cole's band continued to boom across the field. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure he was right. Somehow, a sorcerer was going to expose the existence of shapeshifters to

humansâ€|and ensure that they'd be afraid of us. But how?

The notes carried from the stage slowed until they died out completely and the community clapped and cheered for Cole's band. I craned my neck to look back at my brother. C.A. Nation were already taking their final bows. The rest of the band members packed up and headed off stage but Cole stayed at center stage.

"Thank you everyone!" he said into the microphone, "We are C.A. Nation and we hope you enjoy the rest of the concert!"

With that Cole gave the crowd a wave and turned to walk off stage too. On the opposite side, I noticed the principal once again walking on stage to the mike. His mouth moved but, because he wasn't in front of the microphone, I couldn't hear what he said. Cole did though, and whatever he said caused Cole to turn back around and meet Principal Price at the main mike.

Inside my chest, my heartbeat quickened. Something wasn't right.

"Let's give C.A. Nation another big round of applause!" the principal said and the audience replied appropriately, clapping again. The principal turned to Cole and shook his hand. "Thank you," he said, still holding my brother's hand. Cole smiled at him and gave another wave to the crowd. "Now, Cole," Principal Price said casually. He had finally let go of Cole's handâ€"only to put his arm around my brother's shoulders. "You just graduated from high school last year, correct?"

Cole nodded, looking around slightly confused. He clearly hadn't expected to be interviewedâ€"not that anyone else really expected it either. "Yeah."

"So you knew Principal Wang?" he asked, still smiling at Cole.

"Umm, I guess."

I could have sworn that the principal's grip on Cole tightened as his smile widened.

"Of course by now everyone knows that our dear Principal Wang was killed in an animal attack. Such a terrible loss," Price said and beside me Grace was eerily quiet despite the mascara scarred tears streaming down her cheeks. "But did you know that the coroner concluded that the only animal that could have done that kind of damage would have been a large cat?"

In that moment, even with hundreds of people crammed together across one field, everyone was completely and utterly silent. Not a single whisper or stutter or intake of breath could be heard.

The new principal looked out to the faces of the crowd. "You didn't know that?" he asked. He almost sounded amused. "Well, at first the coroner assumed the cat was a mountain lion but then sheâ€"impossiblyâ€"determined that the cat was actually larger than a mountain lion. Now that doesn't make sense, does it?"

He scanned the audience as if expecting a hand to shoot up and give him the right answer. Cole looked as if he wanted to slowly inch away

from the mentally unstable man but couldn't escape the principal's fierce grip.

"Cole," I breathed, taking a step closer to the stage.

"There aren't any cats larger than a mountain lion in California. So that conclusion can't be right. The coroner must have made a mistake," the principal said, seemingly thinking aloud, "Unless she didn't."

Behind me I heard Brad whisper, "This isn't good." A hand came to rest on my shoulder but I didn't have to turn around to look to know that it belonged to Jet. I couldn't have turned even if I wanted toâ€"my eyes were glued to the stage. In my gut I knew something wasn't right.

I watched as the principal pulled a metal-looking rope from his jacket pocket. A ray from the sun caught it, bouncing a light across the crowd as the rope swung around to the other side of the principal's body and latched itself around Cole's neck.

"Cole!" I screamed.

And I wasn't the only one. All around me people were shouting protests at the principal, but I didn't hear themâ€"I didn't see them. I could only see Cole with the rope wrapped around his throat. I could only hear him gasping for breath as he struggled to pry it off of him. It was just him and me.

I raced forward, shoving people out of the way in my desperate attempt to get onstage. I had to get onstage. I had to get to Cole. I had to save him. I didn't care what I had to do to get there. But I never made it. Even though my feet pulled and dug into the ground, I didn't get any closer. Someone was stopping me. Someone was hugging me so tightly to him that I couldn't move. I lifted my chin up until my eyes met green ones. Jet didn't say anything as he held me against him. What could he possibly say?

"Silence!" Principal Price's voice rumbled across the field. "Why are you yelling at me? You should be yelling at him!" He pointed to Cole whose fingers were desperately trying to get underneath the metal rope. "He murdered Principal Wang!"

No. No no no no no. I could feel the fear I had seen in Brad's eyes seep into me as I stared up at Cole and the principal. But something more ran through my veins at the sight of the rope around Cole's neckâ€"desperation.

I looked back up at Jet then to Brad then to Tommy and back to Jet. "We have to get him down from there," I said to them, pleading. But no one made any suggestions as to how, no one made to move towards the stage. They just stared back at me with sad eyes. And seeing in their expressions made something inside me deflate allowing cold resignation sneak in.

Someone closer to the front shouted that Principal Price was insane and even a few moved to climb on stage to stop him but the guards held them backâ€"guards who I was sure were working for the principal. One man, shouted louder than the others, saying that the principal had just told them Principal Wang was killed by an animal

and that clearly Cole was no wild animal.

I wasn't the only one who heard the disbeliever. "This boy isn't an animal, you say?" the principal asked the crowd, a smile tugging at his lips, "You're right. He's not an animal, but nor is he human. He is a monster." The principal spat the last word as he tugged the end of the rope, yanking a gasping Cole closer to him. "And I will prove it."

The principal raised his free hand and slowly lowered it to the back of Cole's neck. Cole jerked at the principal's touch and a hush fell over the audience as they were captivated by the impossible sight on the stage before them.

The tearing of clothing sounded like an explosion in my ears as Cole's clothes were ripped away from his human form. I could feel tears making lines down my cheeks as I watched his brown hair disappear, his nails elongate into claws and his skin darken to varying shades of orange and black.

Gravity pressed down on me, the weight becoming too much for my legs to stand. The back of my head fell against Jet's chest as his grip on me tightened and he became the only thing keeping me from crumpling to the ground.

People screamed when they saw that a huge tiger had literally taken the place of the teenage boy that had stood before them only seconds before, the same metal rope taut around its neck. But one scream stood apart from the rest and that was because Cole's name accompanied it.

My head snapped to my right and my eyes widened when I saw Skye racing, clawing her way through shocked people to get to our brother. No, she can't. She'd be exposed too. I fought against Jet to get to her but he didn't let me go.

Still holding me tight, he leaned down and whispered in my ear, "It's okay. Fallon's got her." Sure enough, I watched as Fallon grabbed hold of Skye and held her, much in the same way I imagined Jet was holding me. Brad stood over the two of them, guiding Fallon and Skye over to where Jet and I stood. My attention was wrenched back to the stage as the principal once again began to speak.

"See?" he asked, triumphant, "Monsters live among you. They will kill you because it is in their nature. But we can protect ourselves if we know who they are. I can see past their human guise to the monster within, and I can tell you that there are some in the crowd right now." He raised a hand and pointed out into the mass of people. I followed his finger until my eyes landed on Rebekka. "She's one too."

A hole immediately formed in the crowd as people backed away from Rebekka. But the principal didn't notice—he was already looking for another rainbow aura.

"And the boy beside her is a monster," the principal said as Rebekka reached for her eldest son and held him to her. While I had never liked Rebekka—or the rest of her family—I felt sorry for her, and even more than that, I feared for her.

Jet's grip on me loosened and I whirled around at the sound of Brad's voice above my ear.

"Come on," he said, his hand wrapped around Skye's wrist, "we have to get you guys out of here now."

I nodded as Fallon pushed a path for us through all the people, Brad, Skye, me, Jet, and Tommy following in her wake. We couldn't be the next Rebekka—we couldn't be the next ones the principal exposed. Behind me I heard the principal tell the crowd to make sure the monsters didn't get away, and I turned to see a few brave souls advancing on Rebekka and Henry. As much as I hated myself for thinking it, I knew that by outing Rebekka and Henry, the principal would soon find Geoff and Tanner, giving us more time to get away.

I glanced behind me to find that Jet and Tommy weren't the only ones following our trail—Connor, Annie, Grace, and Kayleigh were with us too—but I didn't have time to worry about that. All I could worry about was getting Skye, Jet and myself out of there.

The crowd thinned the further away we got from the stage and Fallon easily picked up the pace. But we weren't out of the woods yet. Ahead, blocking our escape—any escape for that matter—was a line of men dressed in yellow shirts that had the word "security" in big, bold letters on the front. Somehow I didn't think they were there for the band (if there even was one) or the crowd's safety.

My suspicions were confirmed when I heard Brad curse under his breath. My eyes ran down the line, falling still on a man in the middle—it was the same guy who had been rude to me outside the principal's office the first time I visited—the man Brad had said looked familiar. And beside that man stood the one who had broken into Brad's house. Each person in line stood with their back straight on high alert, eyes probing the crowd for people looking to run—people like us.

"Hunters," Brad muttered, adding another choice curse word at the end.

"How are we going to get past them?" Jet whispered from behind me.

"Leave it to me," Fallon said, "Come on." We hesitantly followed her as she sauntered up to the lone hunter at the end of the line. In front of me, Skye shuddered and I pulled her against me.

The man eyed us warily, his hand resting on the holstered gun at his side. "Go back to the concert, kids," he said in a tone that was meant to force obedience.

Fallon didn't turn away. Instead she bit her lip. "But sir, after what we just saw, my friends and I," she gestured to the group behind her, "we're so scared and we just want to go home."

He glanced between each of us, trying to determine if she was telling the truth. Beside me, Skye's eyes were watery and she sniffled every time she took a breath, which probably helped our case. But not enough.

"I'm sorry, but no one is allowed to leave this immediate

area."

Fallon pulled her lips to one side. She raised her eyebrows as she stared at the hunter. "Brad?" she asked, "Am I good?"

I glanced down the line. The next guard was about twenty yards away and thankfully out of earshot. But that didn't mean he wouldn't jump at the first sign of trouble. Still, I noticed a smile tugging at Brad's lips.

"Yeah," he said, "He's human."

I frowned. Who? But I didn't even have enough time to finish my thought before I got my answer.

Fallon pulled her arm back and then sent her fist flying into the hunter's face. The man staggered backwards, blood gushing from his nose. Fallon grimaced. "Eh, not my best work. I must be out of practice," she said, "Run!"

I looked to my left and, sure enough, the other nearby hunter was racing towards us. We raced towards the parking lot and our way out. I glanced behind me to see that the hunter was no longer alone—we had caught the attention of others in the line and at least six others were now following him.

"Hurry up!" Fallon exclaimed, as she ran to the passenger side door of my Jeep. I ripped open my purse and fumbled around inside for my car keys.

"Quick, I'll drive," Brad said just as my hand wrapped around my keys. I pulled them out and tossed them to him. A click sounded as Brad unlocked the car and Fallon climbed in the front seat.

"Let's go!"

"What about us?" Annie asked, stepping closer, Connor, Grace and Kayleigh right there with her.

"Go home," Jet said, barely sparing them a glance as he helped Skye into the backseat of my Jeep.

Connor reached out and grabbed hold of Jet's wrist. "We don't know what's going on here, but we're coming with you."

Jet glared at Connor. "Take your hand off of me, now," he said through gritted teeth, "You have no idea what you're dealing with."

"Guys!" I started, staring at the number of hunters that would be upon us any second.

"Stop!" the closest hunter shouted as he raised his gun to us. The rest behind him followed suit.

Crap. We were so dead. Even if Jet and I did transform, we'd still be outnumbered by at least three to one. And that was counting on my assumption that the hunters wouldn't shoot at humans. Still, we could not be taken. Who knew what Principal Price would do to us then? Who knew what he was going to do to Cole?

Tommy calmly stepped to the front of the group. He held up his hands as a sign of surrender. "Wait," he said steadily, "We don't want any trouble."

The hunters lowered their weapons about an inch, under the impression that we were looking to cooperate. But they didn't see the way Tommy's fingers twitched or hear the whispered Latin word he spoke like a dire prayer. Tommy threw his hands out in front of him, and, before the hunters knew what was happening, they were flying backward through the air and landing on the blacktop with an echoing thud. Not one of them moved from where they lay on the ground and had I not noticed the rise and fall of one's chest I would have thought they were dead.

Tommy slowly lowered his arms and turned back to the group. "You guys can come with me," he said, addressing Connor, Annie, Grace and Kayleigh.

Connor's mouth was hanging open and he didn't seem to want to close it. "D-d-dude," he stammered, "I don't know what you just didâ€"or how you did itâ€"but thatâ€"that was awesome!" Connor's face broke into a grin, and, as it did, Tommy smiled too, relief evident in his eyes.

"We still have to get out of here," Brad said, gesturing to the crowds and the remaining hunters, who (of course) had spotted us as well.

"Where should we go?" Tommy asked as he backpedaled in the direction of his own car.

When neither Brad nor Jet said anything, I spoke up for the first time since Cole shifted in front of everyone. "Bella's old house," I said, thinking quickly, "Her family still hasn't sold it. The place'll be deserted and no one will think to look there."

Brad shrugged. "Good enough for me."

Tommy nodded. "See you soon."

With that, I climbed in the backseat and slid over next to my little sister. Jet jumped in behind me as I put an arm around Skye, letting her rest her head against my chest. Tears ran down her cheeks and dripped onto my dress as we sped away from the concert.

Staring out the window, I realized things were never going to be the same. The principalâ€"Magusâ€"had exposed shapeshifters. The entire town knew what we were, and, worst of all, they were afraid of us. They thought we were monsters.

Whenever I had thought about being revealed as a shapeshifter it had always been on an individual levelâ€"about me, personallyâ€"like it had been with Jet, and Bella, and Brad. It had been my secret to tell. It had never before been about the entire existence of shapeshifters. But now it was. And the secret was out.

****Ahh! You guys are amazing! I have to say that I absolutely loved reading your reviews for the last chapter. Your emotions and concerns are dead on and that just makes me so happy because it means that my ideas are coming out right on the page. So thank you for your reviews! Now, I promise that all your questions will be answeredâ€|just not in this chapter. Sorry but I can't give everything away ;)****

It wasn't a long car ride. Ten, maybe fifteen, minutes tops. But by the time we reached Bella's old house I knew my life had taken an ugly turnâ€as if being controlled by a siren, hunted, shot, kidnapped, and almost tortured in a prison wasn't enough.

Tommy parked his car around the corner while Fallon used the tire iron from my trunk to break the lock on the garage door so Brad could pull my bright red Jeep inside, since it wasn't exactly inconspicuous. I held Skye close to me as I watched Tommy hold his hand out over the door to the house and whisper something. The lock on the other side of the door clicked and Tommy turned the knob.

"The less evidence of a break-in the better," he said, opening the door and ushering all ten of us inside. Although I really hoped none of Bella's old neighbors spotted usâ€or, better yet, weren't even homeâ€ten teenagers sneaking inside a house that was for sale definitely screamed illegal activity.

Tommy quickly shut the door behind us and Jet led the way down to the basement. Down there there were no windows for light to leak through or for busybodies to peek in. Also, sound was less likely to travel to nearby homesâ€although everyone was awfully quiet. No one had said a word during the ride over, and Tommy had been the only one to speak when we got here.

The basement, unlike the first floor, was void of any furniture. I doubted Bella's family had ever had any furniture down here, given the short amount of time they'd called this house home. Despite the lack of sofas or chairs to sit on, the floor was carpeted, which was good enough for me, so I led Skye over to a wall and together we sat down, leaning our backs up against it. She still had tears rolling off her cheeks and I wondered why I wasn't crying myself. I had been replaying everything that had happened in my head since we left the concert, but I couldn't seem to bring forth any emotion for the movie reel. It was as if it hadn't happened to me but someone else. As if shapeshifters being revealed to the entire town wasn't my problem. But it was.

Squeezing my sister tighter, trying to soak up her sorrow, I hunted for my own feelings. My brother had been revealed as a shapeshifterâ€no doubt forcibly because there was no way he would have shifted willinglyâ€and then taken away who knew where to have who knew what done to him. I should feel something, anything, but it was like allowing myself to feel would only push me over the edge.

I looked up from the spot on the floor that I had been unintentionally staring at to see that all my friends were still in the room with me. Everyone was deathly silent, which wasn't natural, and it only alerted me further to the severity of the situation. I was surprised when it was Connor who spoke first.

"Okay!" he said slowly, glancing around at each person in the room, "if no one else is going to say it, I will. How is Cole a tiger and," he turned to face Tommy, "what the hell did you do to those security guards?"

Tommy opened his mouth to answer but it was Brad's voice that filled the room.

"They weren't security guards," he said simply.

Connor frowned, eyes narrowing in Brad's direction, but Brad wasn't paying any attention to him. "They sure looked like some," Connor commented, "uniform and all."

Fallon crossed her arms, taking a step in between Connor and Brad. "Would you believe I was a princess if I dressed up in a frilly, pink dress and put a crown on my head?" she retorted.

Connor turned a glare on her but Fallon only gave him a bored expression in return.

It was then that Tommy stepped in. "Guys, guys," he said soothingly, "We can't fight."

"He's right," Jet said, also joining the conversation.

Fallon bitterly retreated back to her spot beside Brad.

"Fine," Grace bristled, "Then how about you tell us what the hell is going on? And how the principal is involved?" Behind her, Kayleigh's eyes flashed around the room, the tips of her fingers repeatedly running over the ends of her nail-beds on the opposite hand. She seemed nervous, which made sense since the only person she really knew was Grace and she had just found out shapeshifters exist.

Those of us who knew exactly "well, maybe not exactly" what was going on exchanged a look. At first it was, are we going to tell them? Then it was, well who's going to do it?

Tommy sighed. "You can't listen to anything the new principal says."

And for some reason I once again got the sense that Tommy knew more than he was letting on.

"Why not?" Annie asked, speaking with more conviction than I expected from her. But, then again, she could have been using it to mask her fear. "Because it seems like he's the only person telling us the truth."

Tommy shook his head. "Far from it."

"Then tell us: what's the truth?" Connor asked.

"I put the guards into a temporary sleep," Tommy admitted, trying not to look away from his friends.

"A temporary sleep?" Grace repeated, "With your hands?"

"With a spell," Tommy corrected her, "I'm a sorcerer."

"You're joking," she said, eyes wide.

Connor eyed his best friend up and down as if seeing him in an entirely new light. "Prove it."

I watched as Tommy swallowed but walked over to where Brad was standing. He reached his hand out, holding it over Brad's head. Brad stared up at the hand but didn't say anything. Tommy then whispered something in Latin and Brad completely disappeared. Grace and Annie both gasped while Connor's eyes looked like they were going to pop out of his head. I have to say even I was impressedâ€”I'd never seen him do that trick before. Tommy took his hand away and Brad became visible again.

"Man, Tommy," Connor said, glancing between his best friend and Brad, "that is so cool. What else can you do?"

Tommy smiled wide but he didn't get a chance to answer Connor.

Grace collapsed to the floor, her head in her hands, whispering "ohmigod" over and over again. Annie fell to her knees beside her, wrapping her arms around Grace's shoulders. Off to the side, Kayleigh didn't move. Her fingers traced her nail-beds at a quicker pace and she looked even more worried than before.

Grace lifted her head, running her hands on the carpet beneath her. "If you really are a sorcerer, then he really turned into a tiger, which meansâ€”" She looked up at all the faces surrounding her, but icicles seeped into her eyes when they settled on me. "Your brother killed my father," she whispered.

I could feel all the blood drain from my face at her words. No, it wasn't true, it couldn't be true. The principal lied.

Grace squeezed her eyes shut and when she opened them again they were blotched red with tears. "He killed my father!" she shouted.

"No!" Brad yelled, cutting her off before she could repeat the words. "Cole didn't kill him," he said. He turned and looked back at me and Skye. "None of us did."

Connor's eyes sparked at Brad's words. "What do you mean 'none of us?'" he asked eagerly.

I looked over to Jet, silently asking him to do the explaining.

He gave me a slight nod, turning to Connor, Grace, Annie and Kayleigh. "We're shapeshifters," he said bluntly.

Connor blanched. "W-we?" he asked, pushing further.

"Marina, Skye, and I," Jet clarified.

"All three of you?" Annie asked from the floor where she was still comforting Grace.

"Yes," Jet answered, then added, "But we didn't kill your father, Grace, and neither did Cole." He glanced over to Brad who took the reins.

"We aren't certain, but I think we each agree that Price, or another sorcerer working for Price, killed your father and made it look like an animal attack," Brad told Grace.

"But why?" Connor asked.

Why indeed. So many of the questions bouncing around in my head started with why.

At that moment, Tommy jumped back in. "We aren't sure about that either," he said, "What we do know is that powerful sorcerers are working with the hunters toâ€"I guessâ€"expose shapeshifters to the rest of the world."

"But that can't be the only thing on their agenda," Fallon pointed out, voicing my own concern. I had a feeling that all this was just the start of something bigger.

"Hunters?" Connor asked, looking around the room for an answer.

It came from Brad. "Just as there are shapeshifters, there are people to hunt them," he said, "I come from a family of specially trained shapeshifter hunters."

"But you're friends with shapeshifters?"

Brad smirked. "I kind of switched sides."

Everyone was silent for a moment. It wasn't an awkward silence like I expected thoughâ€"a heavy one instead.

Grace pulled herself to her feet, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. "I think I need a minuteâ€"or two," she said as she turned around and headed towards the stairs. Annie and Kayleighâ€"who looked like such a nervous wreck that I had been afraid she might actually tear her nails from her fingertipsâ€"followed Grace back up to the main level of the house.

All eyes fell on Tommy as he began pacing the confined basement. I knew he was trying to sort through all the information we had and figure it out. There were still a lot of missing pieces to our puzzle, but if we just managed to put the ones we did have together then maybe we'd be able to see the big picture.

"Principal Price knew exposing shapeshifters wouldn't be enough to get everyone on his side. He had to expose them while also framing one for murder. That way he would sow seeds of doubt and fear in everyone's mind," Tommy said, thinking aloud, "The question is: why does he want people to fear shapeshifters in the first place?"

"I thought all supernaturals were supposed to be about international secrecy or some such nonsense," Fallon butt in, crossing her arms.

"We are," Tommy said, "Because if one supernatural reveals another then that gives the second the right to reveal the first."

"Then let's show the town was a skiving little bâ€"witch Price is," she said, smiling mischievously.

"And how do you propose we do that?" Brad asked.

Fallon shrugged. "He already admitted to seeing auras, so can't we just tell everyone that means he's a supernatural too?"

I could tell from the look on Connor's face that he was beginning of get lost again, but he held his tongue, refraining from asking anymore questions.

"They won't believe us," Tommy said, "Not only are they terrified, most people have a hard time believing what they can't see."

"So we make them seeâ€"catch him using magic."

"Do you really think he'll be that stupid?" Brad asked, clearing getting a bit frustrated, "The only reason he had the people's trust is because they believe he's human and that he can protect them. He's not going to risk losing that."

"He will have to save his own ass," Fallon continued on as if Brad hadn't spoken, "Look, all we have to do is get Tommy or John or someone to attack Price and force him to use his magic out in the open."

Brad clenched his jaw. "That's a great plan!" he exclaimed, sarcasm dripping from his tight lips, "Not only will you have Tommy expose himself as a sorcerer but you'll have John be the monster everyone thinks he is." Brad smiled and began to clap his hands together slowly. "Really great plan, Fallon."

Fallon huffed. "Well, I don't see you coming up with any brilliant ideas, Brad-ley." The two glared fiercely at each other for a long minute. Watching them I realized that this was the first time I'd seen them fight since they met. Did this mean they didn't like each other? Or was the stress of everything just becoming too much for everyone to handle?

"Stop," Jet said, getting between Brad and Fallon, "Tommy said we shouldn't fight, so let's not, okay?" He glanced at each of them, his shoulders relaxing only when they both took a step backward.

I gave Skye a quick squeeze before I pulled my arm away from her and stood up. "I think we should take the night to relax and rest up," I said, uttering my first words since we took shelter in Bella's house, "Tomorrow we can figure out what we want to do. For now, Tommy, Connor, go home. And tell the girls upstairs to as well. We can all meet up here again in the morning."

I looked over to Brad. "Brad, I want you to go home too, but be careful. The hunters at the concert may have recognized you when you left with us, and while they couldn't have known that we were shapeshifters, I'm sure we looked suspicious. I realize that it's dangerous so if you get any bad feeling, come straight back here, but for now we can't afford to lose you as an inside man."

Then I turned to Fallon. "Fallon, I want you to go to my house and tell my mom that Skye and I are safe and that we'll see her as soon as we can. Make sure she's okay too. Stay with her if you have to."

Finally, I found Jet. "You, me, and Skye will stay here tonight. I think it'll be safest."

No one protestedâ€"everyone agreeing with my instructions and accepting my leadership. Tommy, Connor, Brad and Fallon immediately turned to leave. Jet followed them up so as to lock the door behind them. It was a strange feelingâ€"watching them do what I askedâ€"but, according to the prophecy, I was meant to lead.

"Marina?" Skye asked, coming around in front of me.

"Yeah? You okay?" I reached out and rubbed her arm.

She shrugged, trying to smile. "I will be," she said, "I think I'm just going to crash on a couch or something upstairs though. I'm really tired."

I nodded, understanding exactly what she meant. "Okay, I'll be here if you need me."

As Skye and I left the basement, I turned out the lights, encasing the damp room in darkness. The main level wasn't nearly as bright as before. The sun had gone down not long ago, leaving a few hazy shadows across the hardwood floors. It was quiet and I heard Skye sigh as she settled into a brown leather couch that faced away from the windows. I drew the drapes in the room just to be safe before I wandered into the front hall.

I climbed the stairs up to Bella's old room, a path I had first taken about a year ago when we'd been trying to hide from the siren. It was strange that I had come back here to hide from a sorcerer. I guess the place just made me feel safe.

Pushing open the door, I was met with familiar turquoise walls. Everything was as I remembered it. Her bed, striped down to just the mattress, was still parallel with the two large windows, and the rustic white dresser still sat across from it. While the room was bare, I was able to smile at the memories it held.

I stood beside one of the bay windows, making sure not to be seen, and stared down at the water below. While the sun was gone, there were still a few streaks of yellowy-blue light escaping the sky. Watching the waves twist and turn in the wind, I wondered what Bella was doing now. Was she swimming with Rikki and Cleo in the Pacific Ocean? Had she taken my advice and gone for it with Will? I hadn't gotten a chance to talk to her in quite some time. And I missed her more than I cared to admit.

A sound behind me made me turn around.

Jet was leaning against the open door frame, arms crossed over his chest with a fleece blanket draped over one arm.

"You found me," I said, trying to joke despite how hollow I was really feeling inside.

"You okay?" he asked, not falling for it. He still knew when I was lying. He always had.

I let out a breath I had been holding, closing my eyes for a minute. I listened as Jet's soft steps moved across the room towards me. When I opened my eyes again, my vision of him was blurred by the tears that had formed. I should have known that Jet would be the one to help me break through the wall to my emotions. Gulping hard, I shook my head.

He placed his arms around me, pulling my head to his chest. It was only then that I let loose and my tears flowed down my cheeks and onto his gray shirt. I clenched my hands against my chest to try to regain control but that proved impossible, instead I found myself hiccupping when my sobs wouldn't let me catch a breath. He didn't say anything—he just held me tight against him. I wasn't sure how long we stood there together, but by the time I picked my head up there was a rather large puddle of tears (and snot) on his shirt.

Pursing my lips together, I began to wipe at the wet spot. "Sorry," I muttered, "I ruined your shirt."

He grabbed hold my hand, stopping me. "Do you really think I care about that?"

I lifted my face to look at him, the corners of my lips turning up in a sad smile as one last tear slid from my eye.

He leaned down and placed a kiss on my cheek right where the tear was, scooping it up, not letting it fall. "I care about you, Marina," he whispered, resting his head atop of mine, "You are more important than anything—especially some crappy t-shirt."

A strangled laugh escaped me, and I wrapped my arms tightly around his stomach. God, I loved him so much. "How do you always know the right thing to say?" I asked into the cotton fabric.

He smiled against my hair. "I know you," he said as he smoothed the hair around my exposed ear.

"Probably better than myself these days."

He lifted his head and frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"With the prophecy and the hunters and now the sorcerers, I feel like—I just feel like I'm losing control of my life," I admitted.

"No," he said firmly, "No one can ever take that away from you. You do what you want. To hell with everyone else."

I laughed dryly. "But what about the prophecy?"

"What about it?" Jet asked, "You can either ignore it or do something about it. And if you decide to do something, then you do what you want to do, regardless of what you should do."

This time my laugh was real. "Again, you know exactly what to say."

He shrugged, a goofy smile on his face. "Guess that's what happens when you're in love with the same girl for five years."

Standing on my tip toes, I lifted my lips to place a kiss against his. "I love you too," I said pulling back.

But I didn't get far. Jet leaned down and kissed me again. He pushed the kiss deeper, and I let him. I pulled my arms up to wrap around his neck and I felt the familiar tingling sensation creep down my back as Jet moved his hands around my waist. Kissing Jet warmed me inside in a way that no one else could. It was as if he was sucking the sorrow right out of me, replacing it with pure joy.

Our bodies molded together as Jet led me away from the window. Breaking apart, we gasped for breath as I tore his shirt away from his body and ran my hands all over his chest. I reveled in every muscle, every contour, and every bit of skin beneath my fingertips. All of it Jet. All of it what I'd always wanted.

Jet pulled my chin back up to his before sliding his lips to my cheek, tracing kisses down my neck and across my collarbone, pushing the sleeve of my dress and my bra strap over until they both fell off my shoulder. I stared into his sparkling green eyes as he outlined my lips with a single finger, going outside the lines and down my chest to my stomach. Placing a hand on either side of my waist, he grasped the edge of my dress and slowly lifted it up, sliding it over head before dropping it to the floor.

I wound my fingers through his short, dark hair as we began to kiss again. Gripping my sides, Jet pulled me closer, pushing his body into mine, as he spun me around and led me towards the bare mattress. Together we plopped down on the bed, laughing when our bodies didn't quite make it up the first time. But my breath caught when Jet looked down at me seriously, eyes showing nothing but love. Everything we'd been through flashed before my eyesâ€"that day in the woods when we first met, finding out he was a shapeshifter too, running as wolves together, our first kiss. The list went on and on. All of it had been leading up to this moment. And this moment would pave the way for a lifetime of moments to come.

He leaned over, and kissed me againâ€"slowly and delicately and passionately. The feel of his lips on mine, tracing gossamer lines with a loving intent, filled me with unceasing warmth. Every nerve ending and emotion inside me was sparking in response to him.

It was the first of many kisses like that throughout the night.

29. Inside Man

****So I owe you guys a huge apology. Two months. Two months. I honestly don't know where that time went. And I am so, so, so, so, so, so sorry that I have not updated. I could give you all these excuses as to why it took so longâ€"classes, writer's block, I didn't know where to go nextâ€"but if I had tried harder I could have had this chapter to you at the beginning of March instead of April. Anyway, please accept my sincere apology.****

****Okay, so in your reviews of the last chapter, a lot of you mentioned that it'd be cool to see Bella, Rikki, and Cleo come to California to help Marina and I completely agree! Although I can't promise anything right now, I can tell you that Bella will definitely**

be back (eek!). So yeah, I hope that will quench your curiosities for the time being. Also, I have to apologize because the chapter I am giving you is more of a filler chapter, but I promise that it won't take two months for me to update again. Hope you like it and please review! (p.s. I reached 100,000 words! Yay!)**

The next morning, as the sun crept across my face, it pulled me back to the waking world. I took a deep breath in, allowing dust mites to wander into my lungs, and opened my eyes. For once, being awake was better than dreaming and that was for one reason only: Jet was lying next to me. As my eyes rolled over his sleeping form, the events of the night before came back to me. I didn't realize he was awake until he lifted a hand to brush a strand of hair out of my face.

"Good morning," he said, a smile stretching across his face. He didn't take his hand away, instead pulling himself closer for a quick kiss.

"Morning," I whispered to his lips. There was a moment of silence and then,

"Marina!"

Crap. I had completely forgotten about Skye.

Throwing the blanket off of me, I rushed out of bed, only to stumble over my shoes and fall on the floor.

"Marina?" Skye called again.

This time I could hear her footsteps on the stairs. "I'm up!" I called to her, still sprawled out on the floor while Jet tried to muffle his laughs behind me. "I'll be down in a sec!"

I waited, frozen where I was, listening as her footsteps retreated back down the stairs. I breathed a sigh of relief only to feel blush rise to my cheeks as Jet's laughter rang clear. I scrambled to my feet, turned, and chucked my shoe back at him. But he tugged the blanket up over his head, easily blocking my attack.

I pulled on my clothes as quickly as possible. Jet climbed out of bed and I found myself swallowing hard as my eyes trailed his every movement.

"I'll meet you downstairs," I managed, tearing my gaze away and sneaking out into the hall. I made my way downstairs to the kitchen where Skye was seated on a stool around the island. I was slightly surprised to see Fallon sitting next to her.

"Sleep well?" Fallon asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"Not bad," I said evasively, walking around to the opposite side of the island.

It was then that I noticed Skye was chomping on something in front of her. My stomach rumbled as I breathed in the scent of fresh bagels.

"Mmm, those smell good," Jet said, appearing in the doorway. He walked over to a brown paper bag next to Fallon and pulled out two

bagels, tossing one to me. I caught it, immediately realizing it was still warm.

"Your mom gave me money to get the bagels," Fallon said.

"How is she?" I asked.

"Upset," she said, "Two guys stopped by the house last night."

"Were they sorcerers?"

Fallon glared at Jet. "How was I supposed to know? It's not like they performed a spell in front of me."

"What did they want?"

"I'm guessing they wanted to know if you and Skye are also shapeshifters. Your mother told them you two were with your father visiting your grandparents."

I nodded.

"She wanted to come with me this morning but I convinced her not to."

I nodded again. "Good. I don't want them to suspect her of going against them."

"Ohâ€|well, that might be a lost cause. I think they already know your mom doesn't like them," Fallon said, "She made that very clear last night when she threw them out of the house while screaming about removing their hearts without magic."

Jet burst out laughing for the second time that morning. "Way to go, Mrs. Keller," he muttered.

"Yeah, so while she's upset, she's definitely holding her own." Fallon glanced between Jet and I, "So, how was everyone's night?"

I averted my eyes, trying not to blush. Fallon may have suspected but she couldn't know. There was no way she knew. And even though her question was clearly directed at me and Jet, Skye piped up.

"Pretty good," she said, not noticing the tension, "that couch's really comfortable."

An awkward silence followed her comment where I desperately hoped Fallon wouldn't press the matter.

Finally, she opened her mouth to speak, "Brad texted me. He'll be here soon," she said and I silently breathed a sigh of relief.

"Have you heard from Tommy?"

Everyone shook their heads.

"I'll text him," Jet volunteered. We were silent as Jet pulled out his phone, each of us content to munch on our bagels.

Finishing the food in her hand, Skye heaved a sigh and looked up at

me. "I'm guessing we're not going to school tomorrow," she said.

Fallon scoffed. "Probably not the best idea considering the principal basically arrested your brother and is looking to take you next."

"Besides, we need to focus on finding Cole," I said, impatiently running my fingers along the edge of the counter, "I'm hoping Brad will have found something."

"I wouldn't get your hopes up."

I turned to see Brad softly closing the back door behind him. "What do you mean?"

"I think they know," he said, sounding defeated.

"Know?"

"The other hunters," he clarified, "Maybe even my father. I think they know I've stopped hunting shapeshifters."

"Why do you say that?"

"I tried to join in their conversations last night but every time I got close they stopped talking. Even my mother wouldn't tell me a thing."

"Are you okay?" I asked, "What are they going to do to you?"

"Right now? Nothing. I don't think they know for sure that I've full-out betrayed them. My parents will want proof first. So that gives us time, I guessâ€" he trailed off, shooting me a thin smile.

"So what do we do now?" Fallon pressed, "While I'm all for saving our own skins, you guys can't very well hide out in this house forever."

Jet shrugged, a satisfied smile creeping onto his face. "_I _wouldn't exactly mind thatâ€" "

Fallon raised her eyebrows at him. "Oh really?"

I slammed my hands down on the counter, bristling. "Neither of you are helping!" Fallon stepped back, frowning indignantly. But I paid her no attention. I didn't care if I'd offended herâ€"or Jet. I whirled around, bringing my hands up to cover my face. Did they not see how serious this was? Cole was captured, Tommy was MIA, we were in hiding, we didn't know the principal's plans, and Brad could no longer be our inside man. What were we going to do? What could we do?

We could fight.

I felt Jet's hand slide up my back to grip my shoulder. I reached for it, twiddling with his fingers for a second before pushing them aside.

I turned back to face them. "Fallon's right," I said staring down at the smooth granite, "We can't stay cooped up in here. If I'm supposed to lead a bunch of supernaturals to fight then that's what I'll doâ€"not that I'm really a leader of sorts."

"Yes you are," Jet protested, "and I have more than enough evidence to prove it to you."

I rolled my eyes at his comment but truthfully I was feeling an almost desperate need to hear that proof. Still, despite my insecurities, I couldn't let anyone downâ€"not Jet, not my friends, or my family, not even all the shapeshifters I'm supposed to be helping.

"Regardless, I can't let the principal get away with this. He has Cole and Rebekka and Henry and who knows who else? I may not like Rebekka and the rest of her family but they don't deserve to be locked up and treated as monsters. No one does," I said, kneading my fist into the granite countertop, "And I say we show the principal exactly that."

"I agree," Jet said, "but let's skip the whole purposely getting captured part, okay? Since that didn't really go as planned last time."

"You don't have to do it, I will." I looked up at him, showing nothing but determination. Turning to Brad, I said, "Besides, it'll throw suspicion off of you."

Jet took my hand, pulling my attention back to him. "No," he said just as firmly.

I softened my expression. "I can do it," I told him, reassuringly rubbing my thumb over the top of his hand, "I'll be fine."

"I don't want you getting hurt," he said, his frown deepening, "You're not doing it."

I glared at him and he immediately looked like he wanted to swallow his last words.

"I agree with John," Brad said.

I shot tiny daggers at both of them. "You two realize I'm not exactly hard to take down, right?"

Fallon piped up, "You think because she's a girl she can't fight? Cause I can prove you wrong." She cracked her knuckles menacingly.

Brad brought a hand to his forehead, his frustration increasing. "No and yesâ€"no, I mean, yes and no," he fumbled over his words as he struggled to answer both me and Fallon, "What I mean, Marina, is that this isn't like the facility in Arizona. Not only do we not know where the principal has taken Cole, we have no idea what it's like inside this place. I could try to find out for you, but if you do what we did in Arizona, you'd basically be going in blind."

"We barely made it out of that prison," Jet pointed out, "and that was without sorcerers guarding the place."

Brad nodded gravely. "Before we do anything we need to find out more."

I looked back over to Skye. It seemed her fear was really starting to leak through. While I knew I had to find Cole, I also knew I couldn't disappear on her. Two of our family members were already taken prisoner, I couldn't be the third.

I sighed, trying to rationally think through what Jet and Brad were saying. They were absolutely right. We knew nothing and we couldn't do anything until we did.

"Fine," I said, and out of the corner of my eye I saw Fallon pout, "then we need a new inside man."

"Inside man?"

I nodded. "Brad doesn't have access to the information we need anymore. The only way we are truly going to learn what is going on is if we get the information straight from the top. So we need someone else to get close to the principal and find out what he's planning."

"I'm human and I can defend myself, so why not use me?" Fallon asked.

"The principal may already suspect you," Brad said.

"Yeah," I agreed, "We have been telling everyone you're my cousin for the past week."

"So?" Fallon asked, leaning forward, "If he checks me for an aura he won't find one, so what does it matter if he thinks I'm your cousin?"

"It matters because it doesn't mean he'll assume you're on his side," Jet said.

"He seems way too smart to fall for something like that." I pursed my lips. "Maybe Tommyâ€|"

"I'll do it," came a familiar voice behind me.

I instinctively turned at the sound, not entirely surprised to find Grace standing in the doorway. I briefly wondered how she'd gotten in without any of us hearing her.

Her face was no longer covered in red blotches and her eyes were free of tears. While she definitely looked like she had recovered from the events of the day before, I knew it was possible she had simply hidden those feelings away, forcing a strong façade forward in their place. It was the same façade I had come to recognize on Fallon's face.

"What are you doing here?" Fallon asked bluntly.

Grace looked around at each of us as if the answer was totally obvious. "Marina said we'd meet up again the next morning," she explained, raising her eyebrows slightly, "and when I didn't hear

from her this morning I figured I'd just come by."

Guilt infused its way into my veins at her words. Honestly, I had forgotten about Grace, Annie, and Connor. I was so used to them being out of the loop that I hadn't even thought to include them in our plans. And, judging by the determined look on Grace's face, she fully expected to be in the loop.

"Anyway," she said, brushing my memory lapse aside, "you should use me."

It took me a second before I realized what she was talking about.

"I'm not so sure that's a good idea," Brad said, "You'd have no clue what you'd be getting yourself into."

"I certainly know more than I did 24 hours ago," Grace responded.

"But you're not supernatural. You have no powers," Jet piped up.

"If I remember correctly, neither do they," she said, motioning to Brad and Fallon while I suppressed the urge to point out that Brad could see auras, "and you were considering sending her in a minute ago."

"That's because I have extensive hand to hand combat skills, idiot," Fallon spat, narrowing her eyes at Grace.

But Grace only glared right back. If anyone knew how to glare it was Grace. I had only been on the receiving end of her icy stare once and that look alone had been enough to make me wonder if I'd lost her as a friend.

"You guys can't honestly tell me you think a few martial arts will stop a powerful sorcerer," Grace pointed out, "I can see it on your faces. You don't need someone who can fight on the inside, you need someone who can listen and has a good reason to be there."

"And you think that's you?" Fallon asked, crossing her arms over her chest, her irritation only growing the longer Grace stood there.

Grace shrugged. "I don't necessarily think it's me, but I do think I can do the things you need an inside man to do."

Jet and Brad exchanged a look before turning to me. Fallon's eyes also found mine. They all wanted me to make the final decision. I glanced at Skye, who seemed like she was still trying to process how our lives could have taken such an awful turn.

While Grace had a good point she also had little to no experience with supernaturals and could easily miss some important details.

"Tommy's still not answering his phone," I said, "and we can't wait for him. We need to find out what happened to Cole and the others now. Grace is right." As I admitted it an idea began to take form in my head. "She can go in claiming to want to hunt down the monsters

responsible for her father's death and maybe even get in to see Cole." I could feel the excitement building inside me at this plan. It could really work.

Fallon scowled at my words but she had to know I was right.

Grace smirked. "That wouldn't be too hard to do. I do want revenge on the monsters that killed my father. It'll be the principal's fault if he assumes the wrong monster."

"There's just one thing," I said, causing everyone to look back up at me, "I'll be going in with you." While Grace did have the best cover story for why she'd want to join the principal, like I mentioned before, she was still inexperienced.

"Wait, Marina, I thought we agreed you can't do that. The chance that you'll get caught is too great," Jet said, pushing his hands down on the counter in front of him.

"I won't get caught," I told him, "because they won't even know I'm there."

"Don't you think the whole mouse in my pocket trick is getting old, your majesty?" Fallon joked.

I fought the urge to tell her that this was serious, instead I settled for a simple glare.

"You can't hide in her pockets at all," Brad said quickly, "Any newcomer will be checked over. And odds are the principal has upped the security since he took power."

"I won't be hiding in her pockets," I said, the corner of my lip turning up in a small smile.

"Then how do expect to go with me?" Grace asked.

"Can you pull your hair up?" I asked her walking around the back of her head.

"What?"

"Put your hair up in a ponytail," I clarified. Everyone looked at me like I was insane but Grace indulged me. She ran her fingers through her black hair, pulling the long strands together at the top of her head.

I reached for the ponytail, wrapping my fingers around it and gauging the width. Her hair was pretty thick. "I can make that work," I said aloud, more to myself than the group.

"Make what work?" Fallon asked, leaning around to look at Grace's makeshift ponytail and probably hoping it would offer some explanation as to what I was talking about.

I didn't answer her. I calmly reached for the edge of my dress and pulled it over my head, not even bothering to tell Jet and Brad to look away. My idea had consumed me. I just had to see if it was doable.

I removed the rest of my clothes and shifted. I had only shifted into a snake once before. It wasn't an animal I particularly enjoyedâ€”having no limbs was probably the strangest thing I'd ever experiencedâ€”but it was necessary if I didn't want Grace to go in alone. I shifted into a tiny green snake. I couldn't have been more than two centimeters thick and six inches long. Coiling my thin body, I bit my own tail to form a ring. I held that position on the floor for a few seconds before shifting back and retrieving my clothes.

"Well?" I asked, smoothing out the bottom of my dress, "Good right? I can just pretend to be Grace's hair band and wrap myself around her ponytail. As long as I keep my head on the underside, no one will suspect a thing."

Fallon smiled widely at me, looking almost like a proud parent. "Nice adjusting. Looks like my training paid off after all."

I rolled my eyes but kept my mouth shut because she was right. If it hadn't been for Fallon's "game" back in the tribe I probably wouldn't use as many animals as I have.

I looked over to Jet and Bradâ€”both seemed to be contemplating my ideaâ€”and on the verge of arguing, but in the end Brad sighed, agreeing to the plan. Jet didn't protest either, but I could tell he wasn't fully onboard. As long as he didn't do anything rash, like try to sneak after us, I didn't mind. His reluctance was just a nice reminder of how much he cared.

A ringing sounded throughout the kitchen, echoing off the tile on the floor. I immediately reached for my phone, thinking it was finally Tommy, but my phone was still dark.

"Hello?" Skye said into her phone, her face quickly lighting up. She slid off the stool and made her way towards the living room, a drawn out "hi" coming from her lips.

I frowned at her tone. I didn't know who she was talking to but whoever it was the person was definitely of the male persuasion. The upbeat and slightly more girly sounds were easily recognizable as my younger sister flirting in the other room.

I glanced around at my friends, my frown still in place. "Uhh, I'll be right back," I said, turning and following Skye.

She paced the perimeter of the carpet, watching her toes as she smiled into the phone beside her ear. I stepped in front of her, stopping her path. When she looked up at me, I raised her eyebrows at her, silently inquiring as to who she was talking to. She twitched her lips and turned around in an attempt to dismiss me but I cut her off again.

"Who are talking to?" I asked aloud this time.

"Hold on," Skye said into the phone. She pouted and placed a hand over the speaker. "It's Zach," she whispered to me and then showed me her back again.

"Yeah," she said, speaking to Zach again, "I'm okay." There was a pause where Zach spoke. "I know," she said, her mood sobering,

"Thanks. I just hope he's okay. Cause there's no way Coleâ€"

Her words dropped when I yanked her arm, pulling the phone away from her head. I snatched the phone from her hand and quickly hung up.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Skye demanded, reaching for her phone but I held it away from her grasp.

"What am I doing?" I asked, "What are you doing?"

"I was talking to my friend until you stole my phone and hung up on him," she said, throwing her hands in the air.

"I would hardly call Zach a friend," I pointed out.

Skye shook her head, eyes widening. "What does it matter to you if Zach's more than a friend? You can't dictate who I date!"

I groaned, throwing my head back. "That's not my point!"

She stared incredulously at me. "Then go ahead, tell me! What is?"

"A sorcerer revealed our brother to be a shapeshifter and then took him away yesterday!" I said, on the verge of shouting. I took a deep breath to try to calm myself. "We need to be really careful about who we trust right now. And we can't afford to have Zach find out that shapeshifting runs in the family."

"Why not?"

I blanched. "Wh-wh-why not?" I repeated.

"Yeah." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"Like I just told you, we don't know who we can trust."

Skye glared at me. "Actually, I think you're the one who's having trust issues," she said, "I trust Zach completely. He would never betray me."

"You don't know that," I told her, "How long have you known him?"

She shook her head, exasperated. "Time has nothing to do with this and you know it!" she exclaimed, "You knew Brad for what? A month? Before you shifted in front of him? And he was a freakin' hunter!"

"You know I had no control over that. I couldn't let him hurt Jet," I said, pursing my lips together.

Skye laughed but there was no joy behind it. "Yeah, and what about yesterday?" she asked, "You know, remember yesterday? When you just went ahead and told four peopleâ€"one of who is a complete strangerâ€"that we're shapeshifters? God, you're such a hypocrite."

I didn't know what to say. Because, ultimately, she was right. My dad

had told us that the number one rule of being a shapeshifter was to keep our identity a secret, and I had broken that rule four, five, eight times? Skye had never broken it. She deserved to confide in someone outside the family. I should've trusted her to know who was trustworthy of our secret, but, at that moment, I couldn't. There was too much at stake now, too many things that could go wrong.

She sighed, letting her arms dangle at her sides. "Can I have my phone back or you going to take that hostage like Cole?"

"No," I mumbled, silently placing her phone back in her hand, "Just, Skyeâ€¦please, at least wait until we figure out this thing with the principal before you tell him. Okay?"

Skye bit down on her lip, staring at me for a moment. "Yeah, fine," she muttered, before turning and disappearing up the stairs.

As I watched her go, I wasn't sure if she'd keep her promise but there wasn't anything I could do about it. Like she said, I had no control over who she dated or what secrets she divulged. Just as no oneâ€¦or nothingâ€¦could control me.

30. Educational Espionage

****So technically I didn't lie. It hasn't been two months. It's only been one. That's improvement, right? Not what I wanted but I couldn't help it, sorry. Anyway, thank you sooooo much to those who wrote reviews for the last chapter! Also, a special thanks to *_Divergent123_* for not only reading and reviewing but also for spreading the word about my stories. That means so much. Now, here's the next chapter and I hope everyone enjoys it! I left a bit of a cliffhanger at the end so try not to kill me for that :)****

We were all up bright and early the next morning. Well, everyone except for Skye who adamantly refused to get off the couch, but I had a feeling that was because she was still mad at me. Even after Grace stormed in grouching about how some jackass had cut her off when changing lanes on her way over to Bella's, Skye remained on the couch, her only movement being to pull a pillow over her head.

"And then, of course, after I beeped my horn at him, he just had to go and flip me off," Grace grunted angrily, "People can be so rude."

I smiledâ€¦"Grace always had to be talking about someone, whether it be a complete stranger from the coffee shop or an immediate family member.

"Hey, Grace, how's your cousin taking all this?" I asked. It hadn't surpassed my notice that Kayleigh hadn't shown up with Grace yesterday or today.

"Okay, I think," Grace said, "I'm not sure she's realized this is actually happening. Anytime I try to bring it up with her, she just bites her lip and tries to get out of the room."

I smiled sympathetically. Kayleigh had basically been thrown into the supernatural scene along with Connor, Annie, and Grace. And while Grace had been willing to jump in and help, we hadn't heard anymore

from Connor or Annie—or Tommy for that matter, and it was the last one that worried me the most.

"What you'd tell her this morning?" I asked.

"That I had a group meeting before school started and that I'd meet her there—which wasn't exactly a lie," she explained.

Just then, Brad walked into the room. "You guys ready to go?" he asked, looking at the watch on his wrist.

"I'll go in Brad's car and you and Grace can follow in hers," Fallon said to me, even though I already knew the plan. I suspected she was still a little resentful that Grace had the job she'd wanted.

I nodded anyway and then moved to shift into the same snake as yesterday. Grace already had her hair up, ready for me to disguise myself in it. Fallon let me slither into her hands and lifted me up so I could wrap myself around Grace's ponytail.

The first thing I realized when I wrapped my long body around her ponytail was that her hair smelled nice—well, I guess the proper term would be tasted since I had to flick my tongue to get a full whiff—which definitely felt more than a little strange.

"Tuck your head in a bit more, Marina," Jet said, looking more closely at the back of Grace's head. I complied, further burying my head and hiding my tiny black eyes. He examined my position again and nodded. "That's better."

"Okay," Brad said, addressing Grace, "Remember, try not to leave the school. Just get in to talk with the principal and see if he'll agree to take you to Cole."

"I got it the first bagillion times, _Brad_," Grace responded.

Brad huffed while Fallon glared at her, but neither of them said anything. Instead, the four of us headed outside, while Jet watched us from the door. He was frowning and I wasn't sure if it was because he was stuck babysitting Skye, or if it was because he was worried about me—probably both. I wished he could help more but everyone, himself included, knew the chances of him getting caught were too high at the moment.

The ride to school was quiet. For once Grace didn't talk—perhaps because she knew I couldn't answer—and she didn't play any music. I kept myself coiled around her hair, making sure I could stay hidden and running through all the possible scenarios in my head. The best outcome was that we'd find Cole and break him out. The worst being that we'd both be captured and I'd end up the principal's prisoner or science experiment or dead. Yeah, that possibility had occurred to me. Perhaps it had occurred to Jet too and that was why he looked so unhappy when we left.

Grace's car bounced over two speed bumps, causing me to loosen my grip around her ponytail. We had made it to the high school. Grace made a sharp turn into a parking spot, slowing the car to a halt. Turning the key towards her, the engine sputtered out just as she let out a heavy sigh. She sat still for a long moment. She didn't even reach to unbuckle her seatbelt.

Was she going to get out of the car? I was about to unravel myself, when she shrugged her shoulders, letting out another heavy breath.

"Okay," she said. I didn't know if she was talking to me or to herself. "Okay, let's do this."

She unbuckled, grabbed her school bag, and got out of the car. She began walking quickly towards the building—a lot faster than anyone else around us—and I began to worry. Could she really handle this? Were her nerves getting the better of her or was she just determined? I couldn't tell.

"Grace!" a voice rang out across the parking lot.

Grace turned in response. "Annie, hey," she said with a lack of enthusiasm that Annie either ignored or didn't notice.

"How are you?" Annie asked.

"Good," Grace said, shifting her weight, her nerves getting to her. I wanted to do something to reassure her, but I knew I couldn't without startling her.

Grace and Annie began walking towards the school together. It was a moment before Annie spoke again—she seemed to be weighing whether or not she should speak up—but she finally decided she needed to. She leaned in closer and whispered in Grace's ear, "You don't have to lie to me, you know."

Grace didn't answer. I wondered if she actually didn't know how to respond or if she didn't want to because she knew I was listening.

I peeked out from behind Grace's smooth hair to see my peers weren't congregating in their usual groups—everyone was all over the parking lot—many linking arms for support. Listening carefully, I was able to pick up a few fervent whispers. Each and every conversation included the words: concert, principal, monsters, and Cole Keller. Apparently the weekend did not serve as a buffer like I'd hoped.

"I don't know what to say," Grace told Annie, snapping my attention back my friends' conversation.

"I know the feeling," Annie said as the two entered the school building and the lighting overhead changed. "It's just so hard to wrap my head around," she dropped her voice lower, "they can really turn into animals."

"I know, crazy, right?" Grace shrugged and began to nervously fiddle with the end of her ponytail. She had to get it together soon or someone was going to realize something was up.

"Wonder if they'll show up to school today," Annie mused.

"I highly doubt it," came a boisterous voice behind the girls. Both Annie and Grace turned as Connor squeezed his way between them.

"True," Annie said, "After everything that happened Saturday they're probably going to stay hidden for awhile."

"Not all of them though," Connor said, smiling, "Guess who I saw in the parking lot this morning?"

"Who?" Annie asked, but Connor didn't answer her.

"Grace?" he said, giving her a side glance, "Are you okay?"

Grace's hand froze as she let the strands of hair she'd been playing with fall from her grasp. She seemed to finally realize that her lack of excitement over new gossip was entirely uncharacteristic. "Yeah, fine," she said quickly, "Who'd you see?" She raised her voice higher than normal at the end of her question. I wondered if she was trying to overcompensate or she was still battling nerves on the inside.

"Brad and Fallon," Connor said seriously, "I saw them walking into school, whispering to each other."

"What are they doing here?" Annie asked.

"Why wouldn't they be here?" Grace said, "They're human, remember? They don't have to worry about being taken."

"Yeah, but couldn't they be taken in and tortured for information or something?" Connor said as he draped his arms over both Annie and Grace's shoulders, pulling them closer, "I mean, they do know where the others are hiding."

Even though I couldn't see Grace's glare, I could feel it. "This isn't some crazy spy movie, Connor," she said, shrugging him off, "Besides, did you forget that we know where they are too?"

Connor paled before he laughed it off. "Well, I just hope they don't expect me to take waterboarding for them," he said.

Grace skidded to a halt. "This isn't a joke, Connor," she said accusingly, "Our friends could be killed."

Annie and Connor shared a look as silence crept between the three.

"So, you believe them?" Connor whispered to her, "You believe Marina's brother didn't kill your father?"

"Yes," Grace answered defiantly. She paused for a moment, staring at their worried faces. "You don't?"

I watched as Annie and Connor fumbled for words.

"We don't know what to think," Annie admitted finally, "They lied to us, for years."

"They've been our friends for years," Grace said, "That should count for something."

And before I knew what was happening, Grace turned away from Annie and Connor and marched down the hall. They stared after her but

didn't make a move to stop her. I could see from their expressions that they knew Grace had a point, but they were still scared.

Grace's pace slowed as she rounded the corner. Overhead, the bell to signal the start of homeroom rang. Grace stepped to the side as the hall emptied all its students like the classroom doors were funnels.

Once everyone was clear, Grace hesitantly walked further down the hall. "Marina?" she whispered, "I'm going to go see Principal Price now."

I could tell from the tone of her voice that she was still nervous but there was nothing I could do. I couldn't exactly shift in the middle of school and tell her to get a hold of herself. I could only hope that Price wouldn't suspect her.

She headed down the hall, coming to a halt just outside the principal's office. The door was slightly ajar and Grace reached her closed fist out to knock but froze. Voices flitted through the crack in the door.

"So where are they?" Price asked.

"I already told you, I don't know," someone else said, annoyed. The second voice sounded oddly familiar, but I couldn't seem to place it.

"You helped them escape Saturday," the principal said, "How do I know you're not lying to me?"

"You know why you can trust me," came the male voice, "And as for Saturday, we got separated and they haven't called me since."

"Okay, okay," Principal Price said, placated, "Well, keep trying to contact them. We need them."

Silence seeped through the door after that.

"Why do you even bother to keep that up so high?" the other voice asked suddenly, "There's no point in hiding your aura from me."

It was the way he said aura that allowed my brain to finally make the connection it needed. I nearly lost my grip on Grace's ponytail when I realized who the other person in the room was. But there was no doubt about it. Tommy was inside with Price.

"What's an aura?" the principal asked, feigning ignorance.

Tommy huffed.

Principal Price let out a small chuckle. "Relax," he told Tommy, "I need to keep up appearances." A phone in the office began to ring. "Speaking of which, aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"Yeah," Tommy said nonchalantly. Did Tommy just imply that he didn't care about class? That wasn't like him. But, then again, working with the enemy wasn't like him at all.

I listened as a click sounded when the principal picked up the phone. He didn't say hello. Whatever was said on the other end though made him extremely happy.

"I'll be right there," he said cheerfully, hanging up the phone.

"What's going on?" Tommy asked.

"Nothing that concerns you right now," Price said dismissively. Sounds of shuffling escaped through the crack as he moved about the small room.

I wanted to scream at Grace to move. Couldn't she tell that Principal Price was going to leave? She had to get away from there.

"Well, what can I do?"

"You can find them," the principal told Tommy, "and figure out which of them is the one in the prophecy."

Grace quickly slid away from the door and into one of the chairs stationed outside the office just in time. The door swung open and out stepped Price, Tommy standing in his shadow.

"Principal Price!" Grace exclaimed, jumping to her feet, "I was hoping to talk to you about something important."

"I'm afraid it'll have to wait, Grace. I've got a school board meeting to get to right now," he said, turning to lock his office door.

I couldn't see Grace's expression but something she did made Tommy stare at her suspiciously. While Tommy hadn't given up to Price, I didn't know what was going on with him—or why the principal seemed to trust him—and that didn't mean he wouldn't call Grace out.

"Oh okay," Grace said, sounded deflated, "Could we meet when you get back though?"

"Sure," he said, not even bothering to make eye contact with her before turning and rushing down the hall.

Tommy lingered for a moment, seemingly studying Grace. "Why do you want to talk to Price?" he asked.

Grace crossed her arms over her chest defensively. "I'm not going to rat them out if that's what you're thinking," she shot.

"Then what do you want to talk to him about?"

Grace cocked her head. "My grades," she lied and then pushed passed him. She didn't stop or look back. Grace marched after the principal, and, before I could realize where she was going, we were outside under the increasing temperature of the sun. She practically ran to her car and hopped in, backing out of the spot she'd parked in not twenty minutes ago and leaving the school entirely.

I uncoiled my body and slithered down Grace's shoulder to the passenger seat.

"What are you doing?" she exclaimed, her eyes shifting between me and the road, "Someone will see you!"

I shifted back into human form, allowing my snake tail to split into two legs and two arms to reform at my sides. "What am I doing?" I asked incredulously once I was human again, "What are you doing?"

"I'm doing what I said I would," she stated matter-of-factly, "I'm helping you find your brother."

"But Brad said you needed to stay at the school," I said, wrapping my arms around my body.

"Actually, I believe he said that I should 'try not to leave the school,' and I did try." She shrugged. "But now I need to follow Price."

"Grace," I started carefully, "I don't think you realize how dangerous these people are. If we get caught"

She snapped her head towards me. "Do you want to find your brother or not?" she asked harshly.

"Of course, but"

She stared pointedly ahead. "They killed my father," she said, "I know exactly how dangerous they are."

I shut up after that. There wasn't really anything I could say. This was just as important to her as it was to me.

"I thought Tommy was on our side," Grace spoke up after a couple minutes.

"He is," I said quickly, before realizing that I wasn't exactly sure of that.

"Then what was that back there?" she asked, hands gripping the wheel tight.

"I don't know." I turned my head away from her so she couldn't see my face. I didn't want her to see how worried I was.

Grace slowed the car down as she rounded the corner. "There," she said, "That's the principal's car, right?"

I nodded. "I think so."

"Then let's go." Grace moved to undo her seatbelt but froze when I put my hand over hers, stopping her. "What is it?" she asked.

I stared out the windshield at the house the principal had parked his car outside. While I had suspected he'd lied to Grace, I now knew for sure. There was no way that the school board was holding their meetings at Brad's house.

"We can't go in there."

Grace frowned. "Why not?"

I swung my head in the direction of the large home. "That's Brad's house," I said, "You know, basically the base of operations for all hunters."

Grace looked at me then at the house and then back at me. "Isn't that more reason to go? What if Cole's in there? Weâ€œ"

"Cole's not here," I told her adamantly, "Brad would have said something if he was."

"But, you knowâ€œ|" She seemed reluctant to finish her sentence. "Brad's a hunter."

"So?" I asked, my voice taking on a bite that bordered on the defensive side.

"So he's been a hunter for, how long? His whole life?" she asked, her face melting into something that resembled pity, "Haven't you considered the possibility that he's been playing you this whole time?"

"I trust him," I said harshly, not actually addressing her question, because, of course I had considered that. But that didn't mean I didn't trust Brad. There was a small part of my survival instincts that inserted a single grain of doubt in my mind every now and then solely because Brad was a shapeshifter hunter. I never acted on it, or let it grow, but it would still pop up. "Brad would never betray me. There may have been a time he would have back when we first met, but not anymore. He's on our side, no matter what."

"Fine, but we've still got to find out what Principal Price is doing here."

She was right. We knew Price and the hunters were working together but, because Brad was out of the loop now, we didn't know how or why. "Okay," I said reluctantly, "just don't get caught, 'cause if you do...well, you know."

I shifted back in the tiny green snake, desperately hoping the hunters inside weren't smart enough to think twice about a scaly looking hair band. Still, it was Price I was most worried about. Perhaps the hunters wouldn't see me, but Price was a lot more powerful than a regular human.

Grace casually walked up the long driveway like she was meant to be there and not trespassing. But, instead of making a turn towards the front walkway, she veered to the left to sneak around back. Keeping low, she stepped around the shrubbery, also using it stay as hidden as possible. She stopped when the ground morphed into the puzzle piece stones of the patio, crouching down under a window that I knew looked in on the kitchen.

Together, we waited and listened. After a moment, voices found their way to our ears.

"Yes, sir," came a female voice I immediately recognized as that of Brad's mother. I didn't think it was possible to forget the voice of the person who shot you. "We're positive she's one of them. She

specifically attacked our weaponry instead of our bodies when we went after her."

"But you did manage to catch her?" the principal asked.

"Yes, sir," Brad's mother, Helen, repeated. "A group is bringing her to the house right now."

"Good," Price said, "I will of course want to verify your capture."

"Of course," Helen said. There was a pause before she spoke again. "Sir? She was coming from the west. Do you think she knowsâ€|?"

Even though I couldn't see Price's face, I could tell from the way his tone changed that he was smiling. "Let's hope so. We're running out of time."

Running out of time for what? And what does Helen think the shapeshifter they caught knows? The only information that was completely clear to me was that the hunters had managed to capture another shapeshifter. My immediate thought was that Grace and I had to find a way to set this person free once she was brought to the house, but, after a moment of assessing the situation, I knew there was no way the two of us would be able to win a fight against a sorcerer and who knows how many hunters.

"Here they come," Helen said.

Grace whipped her head around when someone laid a firm hand on her shoulder.

Crap. Crap, crap, crap, crap.

"What do you think you're doing?" a man asked harshly, grabbing hold of Grace's other arm.

She tried to jerk out of his grasp but failedâ€"he was much stronger than her. He pulled her along, practically dragging her across the patio to the back door. I tucked my head further into her hair in hopes of blending together more.

"Sir," the man holding Grace said as he forced her into the brightly lit kitchen space, "I caught this girl listening to your conversation outside the window."

"Principal Price!" Grace squeaked.

Great. We were so dead.

"Grace?" Price asked. Suspicion crept into the room as he scrutinized her. "What are you doing here?"

Grace made a point of clearing her throat. "Sorry to interrupt," she said, "But, like I said, I really need to talk to you."

"And, like I said, you had to wait until I returned to school," he said, "I'm afraid leaving school in the middle of the day can result in a suspension."

"But this is important. Iâ€¦" Grace trailed off. There was a moment of silence as Helen and Price waited for Grace to continue. Even I was curious as to what she was going to say to get us out of this situation.

Grace took a deep breath before continuing. "I want to see Cole," she said firmly.

I couldn't tell if Price was surprised by this or not, but he didn't say so.

"I'm afraid that isn't possible," Price said.

"No, you don't understand," Grace stated, her voice taking on a surprisingly threatening quality, "I want to see the monster that killed my father."

Price didn't answer right away. Finally, he addressed Grace. "Okay, you can meet me once the school day is over. But you need to go back to school now."

"I can do that," she said.

"Good," Price said, "Eric here will show you out."

The man holding onto Grace's arm, jerked her past the principal, towards the front hall. I wanted to praise Grace right then. I couldn't believe we were actually going to make it out of there.

"Wait," Price said suddenly and Eric immediately halted.

"Yes sir?" he asked, turning Grace slightly.

Price didn't answer. He walked back up to Grace, studying her face, before he reached a hand up and yanked me out of her hair.

Grace yelled at Price, desperately trying to get through Eric the hunter and Brad's mother, who had moved to block her path to me, but I didn't pay any attention to her. I was a lot more concerned for my own safety.

Price examined me, holding my green head painfully between his thumb and index finger. "Now," he said, a smile turning the corners of his lips, "_who_ do we have here?"

While being caught didn't exactly come as a surprise, I was still bewildered to find myself in Price's hands. Fear gripped me like an arrow to the heart as I squirmed in his grasp. Someone ripped the arrow out of me when I realized that I wasn't going to break free as a snake.

So before Price could force me to shift, I shifted back into human form and promptly punched the principal of my school in the gut. The last thing I saw was Price's mouth open to form an "oh," before wind whipped in my ears and my vision blurred.

When it cleared again, I wasn't standing in Brad's kitchen and Price was no longer in front of me. Instead, I found myself face to face with Kayleigh.

31. Change of Scenery

****Woohoo! Another chapter done! Thank you to all those who reviewed the last one. You guys are the best! Okay, so initially I was kind of worried about this chapter, but now I really like how it turned out, especially the ending. While some of you may be confused, I promise that everything will make sense in the end. Anywho, I hope everyone enjoys reading this chapter and please review! :)****

"Wha-what the hell just happened?" Grace stuttered beside me.

I hadn't even noticed she was standing there. I was too focused on Kayleigh. I didn't know "what the hell just happened" as Grace put it, but I did know it wasn't natural—it was supernatural. Staring hard at Kayleigh, I expanded my gaze until it encompassed her entire body. It seemed hesitant at first, but slowly a pink aura appeared as an outline around her form. The aura was definitely similar to the pink one I had picked up on back in the supposed shapeshifter prison, but it wasn't identical. Kayleigh's, while not duller, seemed to be faded.

"What are you?" I asked bluntly, once my suspicions were confirmed.

Kayleigh didn't answer me. Instead she glanced nervously between me and Grace, fiddling with the seam on her shorts.

"What's going on here?" Grace demanded, trying and failing to make eye contact with her cousin. When again Kayleigh didn't speak, Grace turned to me. "Marina?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I think you should ask her."

Grace turned towards her cousin. "Kayleigh?"

Kayleigh's eyes fidgeted between us. She seemed just as terrified of us—or maybe only me—as she had been Saturday. She bit her lip and swallowed hard before finally speaking up. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner, Grace," she said, "I just didn't know how you'd react. I wanted to say something yesterday, but you were so upset I was afraid you'd be angry with me too."

Grace's eyebrows furrowed in confusion. "Tell me what?"

Again, Kayleigh seemed hesitant to answer. I pursed my lips together in impending frustration. We didn't have time for this. Price had discovered us, so our chances of finding Cole were dwindling even more now.

I rolled my eyes. "She's supernatural," I answered for Kayleigh.

"What?" Grace practically jumped at the word, eyes wide. "You can turn into an animal too?"

Kayleigh shook her head. "I'm not a shapeshifter."

"Then what are you?"

"I'm half-immortal," Kayleigh relented.

Grace opened her mouth to say something but nothing came out.

"What does that mean exactly?" I asked, knowing it had to have had something to do with how one minute Grace and I were standing in Brad's kitchen and the next we were at least two blocks away from his house.

"Well, Grace knows that my mom, her mom's sister, died years ago, but my dad, heâ€¦he's kind of been alive for a very long time," Kayleigh admitted.

When Grace finally regained her voice, it was no more than a whisper. "How long?"

"Almost a thousand years."

"A thousand?" I asked, unable to hide my surprise, "And you? How old are you?"

Kayleigh smiled. "I'm seventeen."

"But you're half-immortal, so that means you'll live to be like a thousand years?" I asked, taking a stab at what it meant to be classified as this species of supernatural.

But Kayleigh shook her head. "Not exactly," she said, "I'll probably live to about five hundred though."

Grace butt in. "But your dadâ€¦"

"My dad is a full immortal, so, if no one manages to kill him, he'll live forever."

I was silent. I could tell that I wasn't the only one who needed a moment to process this information. Grace stared at the ground, blinking slowly.

"So, how did you get us out of there?" I asked finally.

Kayleigh shrugged, smiling again. "I can be really fast."

Grace raised an eyebrow. "Apparently super fast."

Kayleigh nodded. "Full immortals can move at speeds faster than the eye can see, are stronger than a hundred men, and basically have a photographic memory."

Grace scoffed. "Immortals sound like the vampires from those teen novels."

"God no," Kayleigh said without skipping a beat, "Immortals are completely different from vampires. We don't feed on blood to survive."

Grace paled at her cousin's words. "I was kidding," she said hesitantly, "you mean vampires actually exist?"

Again, Kayleigh nodded.

I tried to ignore that bit of new information and instead keep the conversation focused on immortals, specifically the one standing before me. "So, you're fast, but you're only half-immortal, so what about the rest of the powers?" Being half-immortal, it would make sense that she only got half the powers.

"The speed is the only ability I got in full," Kayleigh said, "My memory is just like that of a normal person, and I'm definitely not as strong as my dad, though I am strong enough to carry the two of you without straining myself." She smirked at the two of us for a second before the smile dropped from her face.

"But, Marina," she said seriously, "I'm behind you all the way. What this Price guy is doing isn't right."

I smiled gratefully at her. "Thanks."

"Well, what do we do now?" Grace asked, waving her hand in the air. She eyed her cousin. "Any chance you can defeat the principal turned sorcerer?"

"Nuh-uh." Kayleigh shook her head. "I don't even think my father could defeat him on his own. What were you guys doing in there anyway?"

"We were trying to figure out where Price took my brother, Cole," I explained.

"Oh, right, he took him Saturday afterâ€¦" Kayleigh trailed off, glancing at me.

"Yeah, after he revealed shapeshifters to the entire town," I said, trying not to think about what could be happening to Cole right now. "We should head back to Bella's. We need a new plan. Besides the others are probably worried."

"Alright, except, I don't really know where we are in relation to my car," Grace said, swiveling her head in every direction.

"Oh sorry." Kayleigh laughed before she grabbed my wrist again and the next thing I knew we were standing beside Grace's car.

I shook my head, readjusting to my new surroundings. "Okay, umm, a little warning would be nice next time."

"Agreed," Grace said, holding a hand to her head.

Kayleigh shrugged, looking sheepish. "Sorry."

After Grace unlocked her car, I slid in the backseat where I found the clothing I had stowed on the floor. "You know how to get to Bella's from here, right?" I asked as I pulled my arms through the sleeves of a blue t-shirt.

"Of course," Grace said as she pulled away, and sped up as she passed Brad's house.

I shuddered at the thought of what would have happened to us had

Kayleigh not rushed in to rescue us. I don't know about Grace, but I probably would have been tortured, maybe even killed—but, on the other hand, I would have most likely been taken to the same place Cole was being held. Damn it. If Kayleigh had just left us I could have succeeded in finding my brother. Guaranteed, it wouldn't have been in the way I wanted but it still would have happened.

A few minutes later and Grace turned her car down Bella's old street. Glancing around to make sure none of her neighbors were outside or sneakily peeking through windows, I hopped out of the car and made my way towards the house. I had only made it to the edge of the lawn when the front door opened and Jet sprinted across the awakening grass. He scooped me up in his arms, planting a kiss on my lips before hugging me tight.

"Jet," I laughed, hugging him back, "while I appreciate the enthusiasm, what if someone sees us?"

"I don't care," he said, not loosening his grip, "I'm just glad you're okay."

For a second, I let myself relax in the familiarity of his strong arms. It was good to know that no matter what happened I would still have this. I would always have Jet.

But the moment didn't last long.

"Well, you should care," Fallon said.

I looked up to see her standing in the open doorway, a hand on her hip. Brad stood behind her, his figure surpassing her shadow.

"Now more than ever," Fallon added irritably. "And what the hell is she doing here?"

I pulled away from Jet, looking over my shoulder. No doubt Fallon was referring to Kayleigh.

"How about we explain when we get inside?" Grace asked, "Since you seem to think that's a priority?"

Fallon glared at her. "I don't think, I know."

I rolled my eyes. How was it that Fallon managed to pick a fight with everyone?

"Come on," I said as I intertwined my fingers with Jet's.

He smiled at me and I was struck by the sheer relief reflected in the smile on his face. He was really worried. Intertwining my fingers with Jet's we made our way into the house, Grace and Kayleigh right behind us. As soon as we were safely through the door, Fallon slammed it behind us.

"Marina!"

I turned to find Skye rushing towards me. It was the second crushing hug I received in a span of two minutes. "Skye? You okay?" I asked, "Something wrong?"

"I'm fine," she said, catching her breath, "I'm glad you're back."

I glanced around at everyone standing in the front hall. "What? Did everyone think I was dead or something?"

A deafening silence echoed off the high ceilings, filling the otherwise empty room. Jet, Brad, and Fallon all exchanged looks.

"When Brad realized you and Grace weren't in school anymore, we came back to the house to see if you were here—" Fallon started.

"But you weren't," Brad interrupted, "And when John said he hadn't heard from you, we had to assume the worst."

"Still," I said, "you guys actually thought I was dead?"

Fallon rolled her eyes. "Stop being so dramatic. We didn't think you were dead. But we did think Price had captured you, or that someone had turned you in."

"Who would've turned me in?" I asked.

"Anyone could've," Fallon said, shrugging.

Brad pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. "You never made it to first period, did you?" he asked as he pulled the corners of the paper apart.

"No, why?" Grace asked, leaning over to get a look at the sheet in Brad's hands.

Once unfolded, he passed me the paper. "These were handed out during homeroom."

The title at the top of the sheet read "Protocols for Dealing with and Protecting Yourself from Shapeshifters." The rest of the document detailed emergency procedures and actions to take in the event that one should come into contact with a shapeshifter. It gave the reader a number to call and reassurance that a special unit would be patrolling the streets to ensure everyone's safety. It also said that the special unit would gladly take volunteers to be trained to hunt shapeshifters with them. Lastly, it reminded everyone that shapeshifters were dangerous monsters that posed a very real threat to their lives.

I was speechless. No doubt Price was behind this, but, at the same time, I hadn't thought he'd do something like this. And the special unit would definitely be composed of the hunters working with Price. Why was he so keen to have everyone in town against shapeshifters? He was a sorcerer. Why did he care so much about what a single group of humans thought about a different supernatural species?

"People aren't actually taking this seriously, are they?" I asked, looking up at Brad.

He glanced morbidly at Fallon.

"At least they finally acknowledged your proper name," Fallon joked, but her voice lacked its usual exuberant qualities.

I shook my head. I didn't care that they were actually referring to us as shapeshifters instead of just monsters who could turn into animals. I cared that almost everyone I know feared me. And more than that, I cared about what Price could be doing to Cole.

"With Price's increased interference, we were worried that you'd been taken off guard and captured. We've spent the last hour panicking and trying to come up with a new plan to rescue you," Jet said.

"Some of us panicking more than others," Brad muttered, shooting a sideways glance in Skye's direction.

"Okay, well did you come up with any ideas?" I asked, "Price still has Cole and we have to find him soon."

Fallon stuck out her lips. "Nope. Zip-o."

"No?"

Fallon shook her head.

"You thought I had been captured and you couldn't think of a way to save me?" I narrowed my eyes at the three of them.

"Hey, we tried," Fallon protested, "But the only thing we could come up with was to gather all our allies, attack Price, and demand he take us to you."

I raised my eyebrows. "That's not a bad idea," I said slowly. Maybe a surprise attack would actually do some good. Price certainly wouldn't see it coming and we could make him tell us where Cole is.

"No way, Marina," Brad said, sternly. "It would never work."

"We only do that as a last resort," Jet said, half-smiling in an apologetic way.

I frowned. "Don't you guys get it? We need our last resort. This is our last chance."

Fallon held up her hands in surrender. "Hey, now I'm all for storming the front and such, but we literally know nothing. Not the where, the who, the what. Nothing."

"But Cole could be suffering!"

Jet reached over and put his hands on my shoulders. "Marina," he said, looking me in the eye, "Cole is strong. I know he is. Remember how he attacked me to prove a point back when I first discovered I was a shapeshifter?"

I nodded.

"He knows what it takes to protect others. And he knows how to protect himself."

"We still need to find him," I said. This wasn't something I was going to let go.

"We aren't arguing with you there," Brad said, "And I think the best way to move forward is to examine the prophecy again."

"The prophecy?" I asked incredulously, "You can't be serious. I thought we already understood the whole thing."

Brad shook his head. "I don't think so. It warned us that Price was going to expose shapeshifters and I think it'll tell us more."

"But we don't need to know the future, we need to know the present," I protested.

"Maybe not," Brad said, "Remember what you told me Eloise said? That she'd be back once we figured out the prophecy? Well, in case you haven't noticed, she's not here, which means there is still more to find out."

"What is this prophecy?" Grace asked hesitantly as if she could tell the words sounded awkward coming from her lips.

"A prophecy?" Kayleigh asked, jumping in for the first time, "Like a prediction from a seer?"

Fallon narrowed her eyes. "How do you know about seers?"

I groaned. We didn't have time for storytelling. "Yes, from a seer. Brad and I are a part of it. And Fallon, Kayleigh is a supernatural too."

"Technically I'm only half, but yeah," Kayleigh said.

"What are you?" Fallon asked as both Brad and Jet squinted at Kayleigh, looking for her aura.

"Brad, hey!" I exclaimed, waving a hand in front of his face. I just told him Kayleigh was supernatural, did he really need an aura to confirm it? He shook his head, pulling his attention away from Kayleigh and back to me. "You really think Eloise meant what she said?"

"I think that while she might be annoying and not tell us everything, what she does tell us is important," he said seriously.

I bit down on my bottom lip. "Fine," I said reluctantly, "Let's go over it again."

"Okay, so the first line reads when red tints Roe, the war of light will begin," Brad recited. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who'd memorized the irksome lines.

"Wait," Kayleigh said, interrupting again, "Did you say the 'war of light'?"

"Yeah," Fallon said, raising one eyebrow.

"As in the war of light mentioned in the Porias Prophecy?" she asked.

Brad raised both eyebrows at her. "Yes," he said, excitement tickling his face, "What do you know about it?"

Kayleigh shook her head. "Nothing really," she admitted, "I've only heard about it. That it's supposed to predict a big change in the supernatural world."

While I held my reaction back, on the inside I was screaming. This was a complete waste of time. The prophecy wasn't going to help us save Cole. I wasn't even sure if it was going to help us defeat Price.

We needed a plan that allowed us to find where Price has taken Cole after the concert. The only people who knew that location, besides Price himself, were the leaders of the hunters. Brad's parents. They would know. Maybe I could follow one of them to Cole? That plan would be unreliable but that didn't mean it couldn't work. Of course, neither Brad nor Jet would like my plan—which meant I would have to find a way to sneak out of the house without anyone noticing.

The disappointment at Kayleigh's lack of knowledge was just as evident on Brad's face as the frustration was on mine. Still, Brad continued.

"We suspect that first line refers to how Price, as a sorcerer, is now working with the hunters who are descended from someone named Roe," he explained.

This time I groaned audibly. Wasn't repetition tied to stupidity in some way? Or was that insanity?

"The entire first section reads—" he started, but before he began reciting the prophecy I jumped in.

"_When red tints Roe, the war of light will begin. Those of the rainbow will be the first plagued. Magnus will bare them and fill the dark with fear,_" we finished together.

"Yeah, yeah, we know—" I muttered but was unable to finish my sentence as I reached a hand to my head. The world around me began to spin, pulsing in time with the throbbing inside my head. What was wrong with me? The unstable scene before me ignited waves of nausea in my stomach and I closed my eyes as to block it out. As darkness closed in, the sounds of everything around me began to fade.

For a moment, everything was silent. I took a deep breath in to settle myself. The pulsing in my head and the nausea in my stomach slowly washed away as the world returned to my senses.

My fingers curled to grip the blanket beneath me. I ran the tip of my index finger over the woven material as I took another breath in to make sure the world was still. It was. I was fine.

Wait. Since when was there something beneath me? Last I checked I had been standing, not lying on some blanket.

Sounds jumped to my ears. Panicked voices and shouts bounced around inside my head. Something was wrong. My eyes shot open. The ceiling above me wasn't a ceiling at all—at least not the type I was used to—no smooth, white surface. Instead, it seemed to be made of a bunch of brush. Where was I?

I slowly sat up to look around the small hut when a woman rushed in, her long black hair flowing out behind her like a cape. There was nothing but fear in her dark eyes.

"You have to get out of here," she heaved, beckoning me forward. Something about her words sounded off to me, but I couldn't seem to place the oddity.

"What's going on?" I asked. I cocked my head—"my own words didn't sound right in my ears either.

"He's back," she said, rushing over and pulling me to my feet.

"Who's back?" I startled at the words that came from my mouth. I understood them. Their meaning rang clear, but I now knew why they sounded wrong—they weren't English. But that didn't make any sense. I didn't know any other languages. And I only had a high C in Spanish. How could I understand a language I had never heard before? How could I speak it?

"The demon," the woman responded. No translation needed for me to understand. She tugged me to the opening in the hut, "The beast."

We stepped outside to chaos. I wondered how I hadn't detected the commotion from inside the hut. At first it seemed like people were running in all directions with no clear destination, but that wasn't the case. A bunch of women were ushering children in the direction of a wooded area while a group of men with spears and arrows ran the opposite way.

Where the hell was I? And how on earth did I get here? Was I even on Earth anymore?

No, I shook my head. I was definitely still on Earth. That had been the wrong question. But what was the right one?

My eyes followed the path of the men. A shaky breath escaped my lips when I saw what they were headed for. I wasn't sure if "beast" was the most accurate name for what was attacking these people, but I couldn't argue that "demon" wouldn't work.

The "demon" was more of a shape really. It stood at least fifty feet tall—or a close estimate of that—and, while it seemed to have a head, it didn't have a face. Or, at any rate, I couldn't make one out. The thing didn't have a solid body. It looked like a tornado in the shape of a man. And anytime its funnel of a hand touched one of the men on the ground below, he was thrown off to the side, landing on the ground hard, impaled by his own spear. But very few men were even able to make it to the demon. Most of them were too busy fighting off the pack of snapping wolves that were pacing hungrily in front of the group.

I stumbled forward in the direction of the attack. Something was off—besides the fact that everyone was speaking a language I didn't know but understood and the fact that there was a giant tornado man—something was wrong with the wolves. Their bodies seem to shake in fear but their muddled eyes bore into the men with a deadly gaze. Weren't wolves' eyes usually yellow?

My body was whipped around. The same woman who pulled me from the hut was now pulling me away from the fight.

"Are you crazy?" she spat, her grip beginning to bruise my arm. She pointed to the trees where the other women were headed. "You have to hide."

While she had a point, it felt wrong to run away like that. I yanked my arm away. "I can help," I protested, spinning around and heading back toward the battle. While a dragon wasn't my best form, I personally wanted to see how this tornado man would take to being set on fire. Before the woman could stop me, I reached out for the familiar tug of skin, focusing on the dragon I had shifted into back on the roof of the hunter prison.

Nothing happened.

I focused harder on the dragon, remembering the weight of the iron scales on my back and the warmth in my throat, but my body refused to shift. I tried my normal wolf insteadâ€"maybe the dragon was just too difficult for me right nowâ€"but my body stubbornly remained human.

Two rough hands landed on my shoulders. She was back.

"To the woods," the woman said sharply, "now."

Stunned by my body's failure, I let her lead me away. Never had I not been able to shift. What was wrong with me?

I looked up at the trees ahead of me. From behind the trunk of a rather wide tree, a girl with long, curly, dark hair watched me. While her eyes were wide there was no sign of recognition in them. But I knew her.

"Eloise!" I called out to her.

Realizing I had spotted her, she turned and darted away, retreating further into the forest.

"Wait!" I yelled after her, "Eloise!" But she was gone.

A scream from behind ripped my attention away from the woods and back to the chaos of the fight. The woman who was so concerned for my safety was now fending off a ravaging wolf. Up close, I could see that the wolf's eyes were indeed a golden color but they seemed to have a brown film over them, almost like a mud puddle. The animal swiped cleverly at her ankles, knowing she'd be his if she couldn't walk. But the woman wasn't stupid either. She reached out for a clay pot and smashed it over the wolf's head. The animal stumbled back, confused.

She got to her feet and pushed me forward. "Run!" she screamed at me, "Luka, run!"

Without my ability to shift, I didn't think twice about listening to her. I ran towards the shaded trees as fast as my two legs could carry meâ€"it was painfully slow compared to my four legs. I didn't slow until the sun was barely visible through the tree branches overhead. The sounds of the battle were muffled now, almost like the

soundtrack of a film. It was when those sounds faded that I was able to process the woman's last words to me.

My breath freefell into my stomach, plunging in with a splash that rippled throughout my bodyâ€"it wasn't a matter of where I was. It was a matter of when.

I looked down at the hands attached to my body. They were much smaller than I was used to. And that, I realized with a start, was because they weren't my hands. The fingers were too thin and the skin tone was a little darker than mine.

I wasn't me anymore. I was Luka.

If you're really, really confused and can't remember the shapeshifter origin story, please reference chapter 5 of **_Secrets in the Woods of California**_**. That might clear things up a bit. Happy speculating! ;) **

32. Another Time, Another Place

Time for another update! Sorry it took kind of long to get this one out and I**'*****m sorry I left you with such a mean cliffhanger. I would say I won****'*****t do that again, but I****'*****m afraid some of you will probably think I did it again with this chapter. However, I do promise to get the next chapter up sooner than this one. I already have part of it written! So, that****'*****s a start, right? **

**Anyway, some of you predicted part of this chapter and I hope that even if you know what happens you still have fun reading it! **

So, I have to be honest. I think I might have had my first panic attack when I realized that I somehow wasn't in my own body. But really, who could blame me? I wasn't in my own freakin' body!

I stumbled through the trees a bit farther, catching my balance against the rigid bark of one when I tripped over something on the ground. A branch, a weed. I don't know what it was. I didn't look. I didn't care. Two more steps was all I could manage before my body slumped down against a tree trunk. My breathing came in short breaths and, had I not been panicking, I would have laughed at the fact that I sounded like I was practicing my breathing for labor.

I don't know how long I sat there, my arms curled around my knees, but at some point I realized I was no longer alone. I lifted my head, poking an eye out from the crevice of my arm to look around. I couldn't see anyone. But that didn't mean there wasn't anyone there. I sat up, completely alert. A rustle to my left indicated that the stalker was hiding in that general area.

I rolled my hands in under my arms, curling them into fists in preparation of an attack. I wasn't confident that I would win in a fist fightâ€"I certainly wasn't the ninja Fallon wasâ€"but that didn't mean I wouldn't try my hardest.

"I know you're there," I accused in the language I didn't know but did. A man emerged from the brush area, slowly and deliberately as if he thought I was a scared animal he'd spook with any sudden movement.

I didn't relax my fists.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, holding up his hands when he stopped about five feet from me. He too had long, dark hair that tickled the tips of his elbows. At the moment, he seemed to find the length bothersome, consistently flicking his hand to brush it back over his shoulder. He almost looked like he was flipping his hair to flirt like a high school girl would. I smiled at the thought. This guy was probably the furthest thing from a high school girl.

Noticing my change in mood, he turned his lips up as well, reflecting the smile back at me. "Are you okay?" he asked.

I nodded, pressing a hand against the dirt to get to my feet.

He shifted his weight from one side to the other. "Well, I had to ask, since, you know, you were crying," he said, moving his mouth in an odd way that made me think that maybe he too wasn't familiar with the sounds it was making.

I quickly ran my fingers under both my eyes, wiping away the tear streaks. I didn't know what the real Luka was like—or where she even wasn't since I was in her body—but I had a feeling she wouldn't want people thinking she was weak. I didn't want anyone thinking I was weak either.

"I'm fine," I answered, purposely placing an extra bit of confidence behind my words. This guy—whoever he was—had just seen me break down and now I felt the need to make sure I had my guard up. What if he was the enemy in disguise?

"That's good," he sighed, but he quickly snapped his head back up to me, "but you probably shouldn't stay here. You're not very far from the camp."

I wasn't? But it had felt like I'd been running for miles. Was I actually that slow on two legs or was this body not in the same shape mine was?

"Where am I?" I asked, realizing afterward that it was a stupid question. This guy had most likely recognized Luka immediately since, according to the story and for lack of a better word, she was the princess of the tribe. Asking where I was to him was like me asking Jet how to get to my house.

But the guy didn't give me the strange look I expected. In fact, he seemed to consider my question, turning his head all around to get a good look at the forest surrounding us. "Well," he said, gulping and nodding at the same time, "we're in the woods."

I laughed. I couldn't help it. I knew we should probably be quiet given we were supposed to be hiding, but I didn't think there had ever been a more obvious answer.

He chuckled a bit too, realizing his own mistake. "I'm Roe," he said, introducing himself.

"I'm Ma-Luka," I said, quickly correcting my slip.

"Nice to meet you," he said, still smiling.

The smile on my own face slipped away when I caught sight of the bow and arrow slung across his back. Maybe he was the enemy? Or maybe he was just a warrior in the tribe?

Wait. Hadn't he just said his name was Roe? Roe as in Luka's brother? Shouldn't he have known right away who I was? Unlessâ€¦|

"Are youâ€¦?"

He cut me off with a simple _shh_, reaching for his bow and pulling out an arrow.

I glanced around but didn't see anyone other than us. "What is it?" I whispered but shut my mouth when he drew his bow, pointing it to my right.

Listening intently, I thought I heard a twig snap but couldn't be sure if it was just my imagination looking for a sound. In the next second, however, Roe launched his arrow and a brown-eyed wolf jumped out of the bush, claws extended, ready to attack me. The arrow hit, dead center of the wolf's chest, and the wolf collapsed to the ground in a heap. I stumbled away from the animal, my shock delaying my initial flight response. Had he not shot the arrow at that exact moment, no doubt I would have been the one curled on the floor.

He walked over to the wolf, studying the body as if making sure it was really dead.

I peeled my eyes from the dead animal to stare at the boy in front of me. There may have been a lot of men with spears and arrows but I'd seen a shot like that only once before, and that was in gym class back in September. "Brad?"

He turned his calculating expression on me, confusion etched in the creases on his forehead. Either he wasn't Brad and was confused as to why I would call him that or he was Brad and he was confused as to how Luka knew his real name.

I could practically see the understanding appear in his mind as the lines on his face melted away. "Marina?" he asked hesitantly.

I shot forward at his words, wrapping my arms tightly around his neck. He squeezed me back, just as relieved as I was. Whatever this was, we weren't in it alone.

"What's going on?" he asked, pulling away to look at my current face, "How did this happen? Why are we here?"

"You think I know?"

He shrugged. "You're the shapeshifter," he said, "I figured you might know more about your history."

I raised an eyebrow. "This is your history too, remember? Or did you forget that you happened to have soul jumped into Roe's body?"

He straightened his shoulders, automatically pushing out his chest, to make himself seem more masculine. But then he flipped his hair

again. "Of course not," he huffed, "But I figured since, the hunters' version of the story was obviously wrong, you might have a better idea about what's going on."

I shook my head. "I'm Luka and you're Roe. That's all I know," I said, "Oh, and theirâ€œour? Tribe was attacked by some tornado-looking demon thing?"

"Yeah, that's the best description I've got for it too," Brad sighed, "I tried to fight it, but how do you fight the air?" He frowned, staring down at the ground. "Finally I just had to tell everyone who was left to make a run for it."

"What do you mean you had to tell everyone to run?"

"All the warriors," he said, "They were following my orders."

"You're the reason I was forced to hide instead of fight?" I asked incredulously, advancing on him. He didn't know that I couldn't shift and would have been practically worthless in the fight, but he didn't have to. I wanted to fight and if he'd kept that from meâ€œ|

"What?" he asked, surprised and slightly scared of my threatening tone, "No! No, I was only told I was in charge when the man and woman shapeshifters were killed by the tornado thing."

"Man and woman shapeshifters?" I repeated.

Brad nodded. "They were leading the group but then the wind took them out and suddenly I was in charge."

I considered this. "Brad, I think the man and the woman might have been Roe and Luka's parents."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, they were clearly in charge of the tribe, and, in the shapeshifter version of the story, they're both killed when the tribe is attacked by a 'beast,'" I explained.

"So that means I'm in charge of a scattered tribe I know nothing about?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

I shot him a half smile. "Guess so."

"Well, what do we do now then?"

"We need to find the other members of the tribe," I said, looking around the area, "The ones who escaped have to be hiding in these woods somewhere."

Brad agreed, leading the way as we started walking. Without my heightened senses, I couldn't pick up on anything: no sound, no scent, not even a footprint. Brad, on the other hand, was a natural hunter and tracker and was immediately able to pick up a trail for us to follow. He wasn't exactly happy to find I couldn't shift (and was basically defenseless), but at least he didn't make fun of me, which was more than I could have said for Fallon had she been with us.

I'm not sure how long we walked, but we kept going even after my calves began to burn. Surely the people hadn't gone this far? But apparently they had. After what I assumed was twenty minutes of feeling like I was walking through fire, we heard voicesâ€”many of them still panicked.

The group was huddled close together, almost as if they were looking to feed off of one another's body heat. Except it was too hot for any of them to need it. Instead, something else brought them together: fear. Had emotions been visible the entire forest would have had lingering trails of clouded fear.

"You're alright!" a woman shouted in my ear as a pair of unfamiliar arms wrapped themselves around me, pinning my own arms to my sides. Whoever was hugging me definitely knew Luka, and, given the situation, I didn't want to say or do anything that would make anyone believe I wasn't her.

"Er, yeah," I said, trying to keep it short, "I'm fine."

I didn't think she suspected anythingâ€”or anyone else for that matter. While everyone definitely noticed our entrance, they seemed almost afraid to approach us. I wondered if this was because no one wanted to be the one to tell us that our parents were dead. While my heart went out to the real Luka and Roe, I couldn't bring myself to spare them another sympathetic thought. Brad and I weren't meant to be here and we needed to find a way back to our own time.

The woman pulled back, smiling at me with a hidden sadness in her eyes, and then turned to Brad. Before he could react in any way, the woman took hold of his abdomen area, refusing to let go.

"You too, Roe," she said, "I'm just so happy you're both alright."

All of a sudden, the voices around us fell silent. A strong, male voice sounded in the clearing, reaching over the tops of everyone's heads. I didn't have to guess as to whether or not this man was the reason the people stopped talking. His voice was so powerful it was hard to believe anything natural could produce such a sound.

Coming around the back of the crowd, Brad and I walked closer to better blend in with the group. People eyed us nervouslyâ€”or was it hopefullyâ€”as we passed.

"You have been abused and oppressed. Your friends and family have been attacked and murdered," the man spoke, standing above and captivating his audience, "You can't fight back and win, and yet, you can't let this keep happening. I have a way for you to stop it."

It was as if the spell keeping everyone silent was lifted. Immediately, murmurs echoed around the area and bounced off the tree trunks. While I expected everyone to be wondering who this man was, that wasn't what I heard in the whispers around me. Instead, most people were murmuring their praises above for having been sent a god to Earth.

The woman who had run to give Brad and I a hug, grabbed my hand and squeezed. "Yes," she whispered, "He will save us."

Surely she didn't actually believe he could?

I turned around and met Brad's eyes, his eyebrows partially hiding them in suspicion. Looking back at the man standing up the rest of the tribe, I only grew more wary. This wasn't part of the story I knew. But then again, in the version I'd heard, Luka had been able to shift. And, for whatever reason, I couldn't.

They say that history's written by the winners. Was that what was happening here? Was the story skewed after everything settled down? In what way was the story I knew different from what actually happened?

The man cleared his throat. "As some of you may know, I possess magic. I am here to tell you that my magic is strong enough to stop this demon."

Magic? Could he mean? This man couldn't possibly be a sorcerer. Could he?

I narrowed my eyes at the man before slowly expanding my vision, concentrating on the strength behind his voice. But no aura appeared around his figure. Either he wasn't a supernatural or I couldn't see his aura because Luka wasn't a supernatural.

I did an about-face, hoping Brad could give me some more insight regarding the man's natural or supernatural origin, only to discover that Brad was no longer behind me. I whipped my head all around, but couldn't find him. How could he have just disappeared like that? Or, better yet, how could he just leave me? My gaze bounced off of every head in the crowd, searching. Finally, I found him—not amongst the crowd.

He was standing above them.

Brad glared at the man standing a little ways from him. "You don't want to help us." He gestured to the crowd. "All you want is power over us."

Brad?—what are you doing?

"That's not true," the man said, obviously not pleased with Brad's assertion. "I already have power and I just want to use it to save you."

I pushed my way forward, closer to Brad and the man who claimed to have magic. Of course, Brad was right to confront him, but I worried that doing so would only cause more problems. Why didn't he just wait for someone else to question the man's methods? But, as the new leader of the tribe, Roe probably would have been the person to do that—if the real Roe were there.

Turning sideways, I slipped between two more people, but a head of dark, curly hair caught my eye. It was half hidden amongst tree branches, but I still recognized it. This time, I didn't make the mistake of calling out her name.

Changing direction, I charted a course through the crowd to the spot on the edge of the trees where Eloise was hiding. If anyone knew what

was going on or how we got here, it'd be her.

"Did you see the amount of power that demon had?" Brad was saying as I literally snuck around behind people's backs. "We threw everything we had at it and not once did it appear injured. My parents were gifted by the gods," he said, taking from the shapeshifter side of the story I told him, "and even they didn't stand a chance. You say you have the power but there is no way you have anywhere near the amount of power that demon has."

I was about two feet from Eloise when she noticed me, and took off running into the woods.

Crap.

I groaned. Why did she keep running away from me? Letting out a deep breath, I ran after her. Even without four legs, I was still faster than her. It couldn't have been more than a minute before I caught up to her and grabbed hold of her wrist, pulling her back.

She stumbled before catching her balance and adjusting to her body's lack of movement. "I can't help you," she breathed.

I frowned. Did she and Luka know each other? "I'm not Luka."

She nodded. "I know."

I raised my eyebrows. "You know? You know!" I ran a hand through my hair only to have my fingers get caught in the knots. "If you know that I'm not Luka then why do you keep running from me?"

"Because I know you want my help to get back to your own time, Marina," she said. "But I can't help you. I don't know how."

"Well how did you get here?"

She frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

"Do you remember how you got to this time? I mean, I just woke up, but if you remember more then maybe we can figure out how to getâ€œ"

"Marina, I was born here." She slowly pulled her wrist out of my hand as if she was afraid the crazy I was speaking was contagious.

"Are you immortal?" I asked. How could she have been born during this time but still be alive thousands of years from now during my time?

"No." She took a single step back, frowning deeper. "I'm a seer. I can see pieces of the future. That's how I knew you weren't Luka."

"I already know you're a seer, Eloise," I pointed out.

Understanding dawned on her face, erasing all traces of fear and confusion. "I'm not Eloise, Marina."

It was my turn to frown. But she looked exactly like Eloise. How could she not be Eloise?

"I'm her previous incarnation. My name's Elota," she said, smiling at me.

I stood stunned. My brain kept trying to grasp her words and form my own but nothing came out.

"Nice to meet you, Marina," Elota said, offering me her hand to shake. "I'm not familiar with this custom, but I saw us grasp hands in my vision."

I stared down at her outstretched hand. She may not have been Eloise, but she did seem to know more than I did. And, besides, I could probably use a friend in this time. Reaching my own hand out, I took her hand. But before, I could begin to shake it, I blinked and the tall trees behind her were replaced with cream colored sheetrock.

I was back in Bella's house.

33. Restraint

For those in the U.S., happy 4th of July! Hope everyone enjoys their fireworks and picnics and whatever other Independence Day traditions you have. Now, a serious THANK YOU to all those who reviewed the last chapter. You guys are actually the best. I love reading all your reviews. I really take everything you have to say to heart. That being said, I hope this chapter answers at least some of your questions while also has you asking new ones. Also, get excited because **I promise that some really interesting stuff is coming up soon :)**

"Marina?"

Was I really in Bella's house?

My gaze passed over the person kneeling in front of me to the walls surrounding me. Clearly twenty-first century architecture, at the earliest. I was back in my own time. But the question was: was I back in my own body?

"Marina?"

I stared down at the hands that moved at my command. Petite, half-chewed nails that could only belong to me. I was back. I was me.

"Marina!"

I looked up, finally acknowledging the worried Jet in front of me. Our eyes met and for the second time that day, I saw nothing but relief in them. I really had to stop putting him through this agony.

I shifted, pulling my knees under me. "I'm okay." But even I realized how small my voice sounded when I spoke.

Jet was still frowning, and so was Skye off his shoulder, telling me that they didn't believe me for a second. Cole probably would have called me out on it had he been here.

Cole.

How long had I been in the past? How long had it been since Cole had been taken? Two? Three days? Either way, it had been too long. And I wasn't going to wait any longer. I had a plan "granted not a good one" but it was better than no plan.

"What happened?" Fallon asked. But her question wasn't directed at me.

Brad stood, slumped against the wall to my left. His eyes were closed and he was pressing his hands into the wall as if it might suddenly push him upright.

"I'm not sure." He opened his eyes, holding my gaze.

Did he remember? Had he really seen what I saw? Or was it just some crazy dream?

"Was it real?" I whispered.

"Was what real?" Fallon glanced between us, not liking being out of the loop.

Neither Brad nor I said anything. We just continued to stare at each other, silently wondering what our little trip to the past meant.

Jet shifted so that he was between me and Brad, blocking Brad from my view. I was about to ask what he was doing when I ran my hands over my arms. It was only then that I realized I no longer had any clothes on. What the hell?

I quickly folded my arms over my chest, even though Jet had already come in between me and Brad. My eyes searched the floor for my clothes. They weren't hard to find. But there was no way I was going to be able to put them back on. They were in pieces a few feet away. The shreds were as familiar as my childhood blanket.

I had shifted while still dressed. But I didn't remember doing so at all.

Hugging myself tighter, I looked back up at Jet. "What happened?"

His mouth shifted to one side as if he was reluctant to tell me.

I rephrased my question. "What did I do?"

"I'll go get you one of my dresses," Skye said. It didn't take an idiot to realize she just wanted an excuse to get out of the room. Whatever I'd done she didn't want to relive it.

For a second, I doubted I wanted to know.

Jet glanced back at Fallon and Brad. I briefly wondered where Grace and Kayleigh had disappeared to. Had whatever I'd done been too much for them for handle? God, Grace was just starting to accept supernaturals. I hoped I didn't scare her off.

"You both kind of went catatonic." Jet refused to meet my eyes when he said the last word.

Fallon scoffed. She turned to Brad. "Yeah, it was like your eyes glassed over and then you suddenly took up miming."

"Miming?" Brad repeated.

Fallon tightened her lips, trying to keep from laughing. "You starting firing imaginary arrows at everything. It was rather comical." She smiled. "But, Marinaâ€¦"

"Me, what?"

Jet let out a shuddered breath. "You weren't funny at all."

Okay, maybe I actually didn't want to know.

Skye walked back in the room, carrying a plain, blue, pullover dress. She handed it to me along with some underwear before skirting back around the corner into the living room.

"At first, you were just unresponsive," Jet said as I pulled the dress on, smoothing the creases around the bottom. "But then you shifted into a dragon."

It was like my entire heart dropped into the ditch of my stomach. I had shifted into a dragon? I remembered trying to shift into my dragon form when Luka's people were being attacked but I'd been unable to do so. I didn't know how, but my mind must have somehow still been connected to my body back here and responded to my plea to shift.

Fallon nodded, taking over the story from Jet. "It was a good thing you were in the front hall. But not exactly so good for your boyfriend there who was standing a wee bit too close."

I frowned, turning back to Jet. It was only then that I noticed the shreds of fabric wrapped around his left bicep and the way he gingerly held it close to his body.

I reached out towards his arm, but stopped midair, retracting it, thinking better. I flashed back to the time I accidentally made Jet slip and fall into a ditch in the woods. But he'd been in his wolf form then and had been able to shift back to his human form to heal. He couldn't do that now because the injury had happened while he was already human. What was worse was that this was my fault.

"It's not your fault, Mar," Jet said, reading my mind. He took my hand in his, rubbing his thumb over the top of it. He must have seen the doubt on my face because he added, "It's nothing. Barely a scratch. Grace and Kayleigh went out to get me some proper bandages. It'll heal in no time."

"Butâ€¦"

"I'm fine," he assured me. "I just want to make sure you're okay."

"I'm okay." I nodded. "Just a little freaked out, I guess."

Fallon shifted, leaning against the wall. "What happened?"

"It-it was like we time travelled." Brad ran a hand around the back of his neck.

Fallon raised an eyebrow. "That's not possible. Besides, you two never left this house."

"Trust me," Brad said, looking up at her, "I know." He crossed his arms over her chest. "But when we went back we weren't—we weren't ourselves."

"Who were you?"

Brad glanced in my direction. "Roe and Luka."

Fallon frowned. "Luka as in the girl who was the start of the shapeshifter race thousands of years ago? And Roe as in her brother who started the line of shapeshifter hunters?"

"Those are the ones," Brad said, staring at her.

Fallon said something else but I couldn't focus. My eyes stayed on Jet's arm and all I could think of how I'd hurt him. I swore to myself when I chose him that I would never hurt him the way I had in the fall. But this was a different kind of hurt. I'd actually hurt him physically.

And Price could be doing the same thing to Cole right now.

Crap. Why hadn't I realized that sooner? Price had forced Cole to shift into his tiger. What if he could force Cole to shift back to his human form too? I'd always assumed that Cole was pacing in a cell in his tiger form. I'd never considered that Price could be torturing him in his human form.

I had to find him.

I glanced around the room but everyone's attention was on Brad as he recounted the story of our trip to the past. There was no way any of them would want to execute a plan to save my brother right now. Besides, the sun was going down. There was also no way Jet and Brad would approve of my semi-plan. But I had to do something. And I had to do something now.

"I'm suddenly really tired," I said, interrupting Brad. "I think I'm going to go upstairs and take a small nap." I started to fake a yawn for emphasis only to have it turn into a real one.

Brad nodded. I stood, and headed for the stairs, knowing Jet's eyes were on my back. I hoped he wasn't considering joining me upstairs. He'd be disappointed—and freaked—when he discovered I wasn't there.

At the top of the stairs, I headed down the hall to Bella's old room. To keep up the ruse, I made a point of closing the door. Sneaking down the rest of the hall, I tiptoed down the back staircase that connected to the kitchen. I cringed inwardly when the sliding glass

door groaned as I pushed it open. Hopefully no one heard it.

Outside, I made my way towards the cover of nearby trees, preparing to my dress, I gripped the elastic of my underwear and pulled it down until the pair fell in a heap on the ground. I drew my elbow in, tucking it in the armpit of my dress, ready to drag the whole thing over my head when someone cleared their throat behind me.

Crap. So much for sneaking away.

I slowly turned around, raising my eyebrows and doing my best to look innocent. It was Jet. He stood there, arms crossed over his chest, making the sleeves of his t-shirt strain against the muscles beneath them, accentuating the bulk of scraps wrapped around his left one. I had the strangest mix of emotions at that moment. On one hand I had the urge to slide my fingers over his biceps and feel the muscles quiver at my touch, but on the other I had a wave of guilt knock me off my feet.

He smirked at me, his eyes finding the pair of underwear on the ground. "Normally I would ask what you're doing," he said, the air around him practically catching fire, "but, given the situation, I think the better question is why aren't you doing it in the bedroom in front of me?"

I studied him and swallowed, trying to gulp down my own desires. He was hardcore flirting with me right now and he looked damn hot doing it. The question was whether or not I would take the bait. Did I want to? Of course I did. But should I? I couldn't stop myself from imagining Cole's face if he ever discovered I'd put off rescuing him for a few extra romantic moments with Jet. It wasn't a pleasant expression.

I dropped my innocent look, giving in, though not in the way my body wanted. "How'd you know I was out here?"

"Taking a nap?" he said, throwing my words back at me, "When was the last time you ever felt the need to sleep during the day?" He smirked again.

I considered telling him if he wasn't careful his face might freeze that way. But he was being pretty cockyâ€”or maybe he was just having too much fun flirtingâ€”I had a feeling if I said that he'd come back with another quip.

"Come on, Mar, I think I know you better than that. Besides, did you forget that I have a personal Marina-lie-detector built in?"

I laughed at that. He had a point. I should have known I couldn't fool him no matter how hard I tried.

He smiled at me knowingly. "So what are you really doing? Besides torturing me?"

I stared at him, my eyes beginning to sting. I knew I could trust him. I'd always been able to trust Jet. But I also knew I could trust him to try to keep me safe. And what I wanted to do wouldn't be safe. Still, like he said, I couldn't lie to him.

"I'm going to find Cole," I told him, turning around, "and you can't stop me. I need to save him. I have no idea what Price has been doing to him, but whatever it is, I can't let it happen anymore." I knew I was rambling but the words just kept coming. My eyes filled with water. "I've already lost my dad to the tribe. I can't lose Cole too. I have to do this."

"Okay."

I halted. I hadn't expected him to agree with me. The tears threatening to escape evaporated as I turned back around. He had a soft smile on his face.

He took a step closer to me. "What's your plan?" he asked.

"I'm going to follow Brad's parents." I reached down to pull the dress Skye gave me back over my head.

Jet visibly swallowed, his eyes on my bare legs. He moved his gaze back up to my face. "I'm coming with you."

I stopped. "I don't think that's good idea." The last time Jet had been anywhere near Brad's "his" father, he'd tried to attack him. How could I know he wouldn't do the same thing? I was sure Jet still harbored at least some "if not a lot of resentment towards Nathan. If he came with me would he be able to put those emotions aside?

He raised his eyebrows at me. "How are you going to follow both Nathan and Helen at the same time? Just because they're married doesn't mean they'll go everywhere together. And not even you can be in two places at once."

Okay, he had a point. I hadn't figured out what I would do if Helen and Nathan separated. I hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Fine." I gave in. "But you stay on Helen. Honestly, I don't trust you around Nathan."

He chuckled. "Alright. But, just so you know, at this point, I'm an expert at keeping my emotions in check."

"And how do you suppose that?" I turned and tugged the dress up and over my head, preparing to shift. But I didn't get that far.

Jet reached out and snatched my wrist, making me gasp. He twirled me around, pulling me back to him so there was maybe an inch between us. I stared up into his meadow, green eyes. There was no escaping the forest fire of desire burning behind them. I felt a deep blush slither its way up into my cheeks under his unwavering gaze.

He smiled "his heartbreakingly sexy smile" and leaned down, planting a single kiss on my hairline. I waited for more, but instead he took a step back, creating a cool distance between us.

"See?" He smirked. "Emotions completely under control." As he walked towards the tree line, he removed his shirt and shorts to shift.

I narrowed my eyes as I watched him, pursing my lips. Growling, I jumped forward and shifted mid-jump. At least my blushing cheeks were no longer visible in my wolf form. I raced into the forest, not

bothering to wait for Jet. Not that I had toâ€”within seconds he was on my heels. Despite being wolves, I heard him laughing at me. I pushed my legs to go faster. But my speed didn't deter him and he kept pace with me.

We hadn't gotten far when I picked up the scent of Brad's mother. It was just like when Grace was sneaking around the back of his house. Just as I couldn't forget the sound of her voice then, the fierce memory of her scent came rushing back to me. Only this time she wasn't going to shoot me. Because I was stalking her and not the other way around.

I slowed down, following the scent through the brush. Jet was silent behind me. I lifted my snout to the sky to get a big whiff. Someone else was nearbyâ€”to the left if I wasn't mistakenâ€”and I was pretty sure it was Nathan.

Turning to Jet, I jerked my head to the right, indicating that he should follow Helen's trail while I would take Nathan's. He didn't seem happy about separating, but it'd been his idea and he'd given me his word that he would follow Helen and not Nathan. He quietly crept through the brush after Brad's mother while I turned and headed in the direction of his father.

The woods were eerily silent. I walked until Nathan came into sight a few yards away. Crouching low, I stayed hidden, just watching him. He too was quietâ€”blending in with the nature around him. If I hadn't been listening to his movements, I wouldn't have picked up on them at all. He knew exactly how to move his body in order to remain stealthy. I wondered if it was something he'd taught Brad.

As Nathan made his way through the forest, gun held steady, I followed along behind him. Once or twice he checked behind him, but I had made sure I was out of sight. After a second he'd turn back around, soundlessly shaking his head. I don't know what made him turn around. I knew I was being silentâ€”even I couldn't hear my own footfalls. Perhaps it was just his hunter instinct. Like my instinct was telling me to keep a safe distance between us.

It took me longer than it should have to realize that he was headed back towards the road. Excitement bubbled inside me. If he was going back to his car then he could be going to the place where Cole was being held and I could follow him. Of course, it'd be more difficult to follow him on the road but I was determined to do it. I wasn't going to lose him and my chance to find my brother.

I waited inside the dark trees as Nathan lowered his gun and fished in his pocket for his car keys. Well, car was the wrong wordâ€”it was a van really. A black, windowless van. He pulled the keys out and, unlocking the van, opened the driver's side door. He placed his gun down on the seat and reached further into the van for something.

Before I could process what was happening, Nathan whipped out a small revolver and shot it in my direction. Correctionâ€”he shot it at meâ€”directly at me. A sharp pain spurted from my chest.

I shouldn't have been surprised that he would have such good aim or quick reflexes. Brad was the same way. And yet, I was taken aback.

I glanced down at the thing sticking out of my fur. It wasn't a bulletâ€"there was no blood. It was a tranquilizer dart. So he didn't want to kill me. That was good to know. But still, what was with Brad's parents and wanting to shoot me?

I felt the effects of the tranquilizer begin to take effect, clouding up my brain.

Neither of them ever shot Jet or the rest of my family. Why'd they have to pick on me?

My body slumped to the ground as Nathan approached me. Apparently he knew I'd been following him.

Still, why me? Couldn't Brad's parents pick on someone else? Waitâ€"no. I didn't want them to do that. I wanted him to take me to Cole. Yeahâ€"this was exactly what I wanted.

The last thing I remember seeing before I passed out was Nathan standing over me.

"You've caused a lot of trouble, missy," he said. Then my vision turned to black and whatever he said next was lost to my ears. My last fleeting thought was that Jet was going to be seriously pissed that I'd gotten myself caught.

****Sorry for another cliffhanger.****

34. Covert Collaborator

****Thank you, thank you, thank you for your reviews. I swear every review makes my day :) Now, with this chapter I purposely tried not to end with a cliffhanger, and I think I succeeded. At least you*****ll have a general idea where the chapter after this will go. Anyway, happy reading!****

When I woke up I found myself sprawled out on some metal flooring. The movement of my cage told me I was riding in the back of Nathan's van. My claws dragged against the floor, creating a rough swishing sound. I had no idea how much time had passed since Nathan shot me with the tranquilizer dart. Did Jet know I'd been taken? Did the others even know we were gone?

Looking around my prison transport, I noticed a small, probably six by eight, window with steel bars over it. I guessed it led to the cockpit when Nathan drove. I tried to walk over to take a peek out, but my leg caught on something. Glancing down, I noticed that my ankle was attached to a largeâ€"clearly unbreakableâ€"chain on the one wall.

Jeez, he wasn't messing around.

But neither was I. And what Nathan didn't know was that I could shift into essentially any animal I wanted and easily slip out of my cuff. And that way, when he opened the back to take me into the same place Cole was being held, I could freely attack him and rescue my brother.

But I wanted to look out that small window. There was still a teeny

bit of light streaming through meaning either the sun had just set or was about to, so not that much time could have passed. I still needed an idea about where we were going though.

I shifted into a regular house cat in order to slip my chains. Once again I moved towards the window, expecting to get further, but, once again, I was pulled back.

What theâ€”?

Looking back at the foot that had been chained, I found that it was still cuffed. I frowned. I could have sworn my cat feet were smaller than my wolf feet. They had to be.

Watching the chain, I shifted smaller againâ€”into a rabbitâ€”thinking that surely this time I would be free. But as I shifted, I watched, amazed as the cuff and chain got smaller with me. No, that wasn't possible. I was just seeing things. Maybe there was something else in that tranq dart.

To make sure I wasn't going crazy, I shifted once more. This time into a mouse. But even with an ankle more than three times as small as my wolf one, I couldn't slip out of the cuff.

Crap. The chain was enhanced with magic. Damn Price and his damn sorcerers helping the hunters.

Glancing up at the window that now seemed stories away as a mouse, I decided the only way I was going to be able to look out was if I leaned as far over as I couldâ€”in human form. I would just have to make sure that Nathan didn't see me.

I shifted back to normal and took a hesitant step towards the front of the van. But I didn't get very far.

The van slammed to a halt and I was thrown into the metal divider, my head thumping against the steel before the chain yanked me back. Apparently I didn't have to stretch as far as I thought.

I heard a door at the front open and I pulled myself into a standing position in order to see through the small glass window. The chain dug into the skin at my ankles, making it difficult to remain standing but if I wanted to survive this I had to know what was happening. Even though it might have been a bit early, my body released a sigh of relief at the sight of Brad standing, arms crossed, a scowl across his features, in the middle of the road, his figure illuminated by the headlights of the van. His father approached him and even though he had his back turned it was easy to tell he wasn't pleased with his son's actions.

"What are you doing?" Nathan asked. His voice was muffled by the distance but I could still make out every word.

"I'll take her from here," Brad said, not moving from his position or changing his stance.

"You are not informed of the location," came his father's formal response, "nor have you been cleared to receive such information."

"That is irrelevant," Brad said, taking the same tone his father did, "I will take care of her."

Nathan turned his head, glancing back at me in his van, his eyes narrowing. "Why are so intent on getting a hold of this one?"

I pulled at the chains on my ankles again. I didn't know how he did it but I knew that somehow Nathan figured out Brad had turned against the hunters.

If Brad realized this he didn't show it. He didn't even flinch at his father's question. "The satisfaction of the hunt," he replied calmly, "I have been following her trail for a long time and I want the pleasure of finishing her off myself."

Had I not known Brad and that he was lying I would have been terrified of him right now, the coldness in his eyes appeared absolute. He was every bit the fearsome hunter he was believed to be.

His father seemed to consider this story before he swung his arm out, gesturing to the van. "Then she is all yours," he said and pulling a handgun from the inside of his jacket he added, "You can kill her now."

It was then that Brad flinched. Nathan put the gun in his son's hands, pushing his fingers down over the handle to close his grasp.

"What are you waiting for?" His father asked, "The others don't have to know about this. We can say she fought too much-that she attacked youâ€"that you had to put her down."

Brad didn't say anything. He met my eyes before turning to his father, his expression unreadable. His grip on the gun tightened and he raised it, pointing the barrel directly at his father's head.

"Let her go," he said through gritted teeth.

"Why? You know what she is," Nathan said, "she's a monster."

"You're the monster," Brad responded, "Now, take out your keys and unlock the back or I'llâ€"

"You'll what?" Nathan asked, "You'll kill your own father?"

Brad exhaled slowly. "No," he sighed reluctantly.

A half-naked figure emerged from the darkness of the trees lining the road.

"But I will," Jet growled, stepping into the light.

In the blink of an eye, Jet had rushed Nathan, his hands appearing almost magically around the older man's throat. This, I could easily say, surprised Nathan and he stumbled back from the force of Jet's impact. Brad immediately dropped the gun on the pavement and lunged at his father and brother, both struggling to against the other's attack.

"Stop it!" Brad yelled, pulling at their interlocked arms, but his attempts at peace went unnoticed, "John! I said stop!"
>But again, Jet didn't listen. Instead he tightened his grip around his father's neck and I watched as Nathan began to gasp for air. Suddenly a fist was flying through the air, but instead of making contact with Nathan as I expected, it hit Jet square in the jaw. Jet released his grip on Nathan's neck and stumbled backward a few steps, his hand flying the spot on his face where Brad had punched him.<p>

"What the hell?" Jet shouted, turning his anger on Brad.

"I couldn't let you kill him," Brad said, taking a deep breath.

"Couldn't let me?" Jet seethed, his voice rising, "He killed my mother! He wants to kill Marina!"

"I know but killing him won't bring her back," Brad reasoned, "and besides, if you kill him you will lose another parent, do you really want that?"

"He is not my father," Jet spat.

Brad didn't say anything, he just stared at Jet, obviously worried that he'd attack again.

Nathan seemed thoroughly confused by now but didn't say anything. He clearly could tell it'd be better not to draw attention to himself in this situation.

Jet glared at his biological father. "Aren't you going to say something, Dad?" He asked, the last word laced with so much venom that you would have thought Jet's tongue was a knife that had sliced through your soul.

Nathan frowned at the word, staring at Jet, trying to put the pieces together. A second later, his eyes widened, finally seeing the resemblance that everyone else who'd known Deirdre did. "You-you look like...she...but that's not possible," Nathan muttered, fumbling to create proper sentences.

Jet smirked at Nathan's shock. "It's definitely possible. You got my mother pregnant then found out she was a shapeshifter and hunted her down until you had her killed!"

Nathan looked down, shaking his head, while the tension in his body was visibly released. When he lifted his head his eyes were on Brad. "Like father, like son," he said, a smile on his face.

The smile was not echoed on Brad's face. Instead, the corners of his lips turned down in a frown.

Nathan's sudden good mood did bit change as he shifted his gaze from Brad to Jet. "I never knew Deirdre was pregnant," he said to Jet.

"Would it have changed anything?" Jet asked, still fuming, "You still would have captured her and sent her to that horrible prison to meet

her death."

It was only then that the smile on Nathan's face melted away and was instead replaced with a look of confusion. "Deirdre's not dead."

This statement only seemed to anger Jet more and Brad, noticing this, took a step forward, putting himself between his father and Jet.

"What are you talking about?" Jet asked, "You left her in the desert prison and allowed them to do who knows what kind of test on her until she couldn't take it anymore and died. You killed her!"

"Did you break into the prison and search their records?" Nathan asked, a strange look on his face.

Brad nodded. "That's where I disappeared to for those few days."

Nathan sighed, glancing between his two sons. "I did take Deirdre, or Deanna as I knew her, to the prison but I went back for her," he explained, "After I dropped her off, I had a sort of moment of realization. I remembered all that we'd been through together over the last few months and I knew that everything I'd been taught about shapeshifters was a lie. So I went back and got her out. Together we faked her death so no one would be suspicious or go looking for her."

There was a period of silence as both boys took in this new information. "So my mother's alive?"

Nathan nodded. "As far as I know. She used to write letters to me once a year. I haven't heard from recently but last I did she was fine.

"She moves around a lot. Never tells me where though in case someone finds the letter." He paused seeming to consider something. "Even before she told me what she was I had a sense that she was in the run."

That sense, of course, had been right since Deirdre had escaped the tribe before meeting Nathan and Janet.

"If you were chasing her all that time how did you not know she was pregnant?" Jet asked, having grasped the idea that his birth mother wasn't dead like he thought.

Again, Nathan frowned. "When she disappeared from the apartment the day after she told me she was a shapeshifter, I followed her. I didn't know whether I was following her because I loved her or if I was following her because it was my job, but I did it. Somehow she was always a step ahead of me. I didn't actually see her again until I finally caught her a year later, and, by then the memories of us together had been pushed to the back of my mind.

"I had no idea she was pregnant the whole time." Nathan's shoulders sank. "I couldn't have made it easy on her. She had always been strong, but I never knew she was that strong: to be on the run for her life while pregnant?"

"What aboutâ€" Brad started then stopped before getting up the courage to ask what he wanted. "What about my mother?"

Nathan's shoulders lifted then immediately slumped once more. "I love your mother, Brad," he said reassuringly.

"But I'm only a few months older than John," Brad pointed out.

"Around the time your mother got pregnant, we weren't getting along well," his father explained, "While our marriage hadn't technically been an arranged marriage we really considered it to be the closest thing to it. So when I got the information about a potential shapeshifter, I left, thinking that the time apart would do us good. While I'm not saying what I did was right, it would have been impossible for me to deny the connection Deirdre and I had. But I had no idea the job would take so long or that when I returned I would have another son."

Brad and Jet exchanged looks. It was only then that I realized it was essentially the same one-they must have gotten it from their father. They turned to him, Jet still eyeing him warily.

"Keys," Brad demanded, indicating that his request wasn't negotiable.

Nathan fished around in the pockets of his jacket before brandishing a pair of silver keys that had to match the lock on the back door of the van. He handed them over to Brad without further hesitation.

Brad took a few steps towards me but didn't turn his back on his father and Jet. I got the impression that he still wasn't entirely convinced one wasn't about to jump the other.
>Nathan looked over to Jet, who had his arms crossed over his bare chest.<p>

"So," Nathan said awkwardly, "I guess you can call me Nathan for now...John. It is John, right?"

Jet nodded, not smiling.

Nathan stared at him. He seemed to be trying to find all the genetic similarities he shared with his new found son. In my opinion, their nose was definitely one of them.

"Do you mind me asking...?" Nathan trailed off, eyes still on Jet, "I assume you are since you came out of the woods without a shirt but youâ€" "

Jet cut him off before he could finish his sentence. "I am a shapeshifter if that's what you're asking," Jet replied curtly, then added, "You going to hunt me down now?"

"No, of course not," Nathan said rather quickly.

"Why did you continue hunting then even after you found out that you were wrong about shapeshifters?"

"Because hunting has run in our family for centuries. It wasn't something I could just quit," Nathan answered, "I had to at least keep up a ruse."

"A ruse?" Brad asked, speaking up from beside the van. He still hadn't taken his eyes off the two in the middle of the road.

Nathan nodded. "Ever since I helped Deirdre, I haven't killed a shapeshifter."

"But I've seen you shoot one before," Brad insisted.

"I've been either capturing them and setting them free elsewhere or shooting them with a tranquilizer dart instead of a bullet for over a decade now."

"And no one ever figured it out?"

Nathan smiled. "Nope. Being the leader does have its perks. People tend to assume you are doing things the right way."

Something that looked oddly like a smile found its way onto Jet's face, if only for the briefest of seconds.

Finally satisfied that his father and half-brother weren't going to fight again, Brad walked around back to let me out of the van. The back door swung open and Brad immediately reached for the cuffs locked around my ankles. Using one of the keys he had taken from his father, he inserted it into the lock and turned until he heard a click. He glanced up at me before quickly averting his gaze. Pulling at the cuffs of his coat, he shrugged it off and handed it to me while still looking down at the blacktop.

I stuck my arms through the sleeves and, tugging it closed around my front, hopped down from the containment unit. "Thank you," I told Brad.

He looked up at me then and gave me a small smile. "I promised you that I'd never abandon you...but please don't do anything stupid like that again."

I glared but didn't say anything. Together we walked over to where Jet and Nathan were still standing, trying not to make eye contact.

Brad's father eyed me, as if he was seeing me for the first time. The shock on his face was more than apparent. He clearly hadn't expected the girl his son had brought over for dinner last fall to be the one stepping out of the back of his van.

"Dad," Brad said, glancing between all of us, "you know Marina. And this is John. They're my best friends."

It took a moment for Nathan to take this in as if he couldn't believe his son had managed to make not one but two shapeshifter friends but he composed himself and smiled at me. "Nice to meet you," he said then turned to Jet, "both of you."

"How about we all get out of the road and go get something to eat?" Brad suggested. His eyes wandered to Jet's bare chest and my exposed

legs. "After you two put on proper clothes of course."

//*/*

An hour later, after we stopped to get Jet and I some extra clothes, Brad, Jet, their father, and I sat around a table at a pizzeria in the next town over. Nathan explained that we were safer out of town since the hunters were mainly focusing their attention on our town.

While we munched on slices of pepperoni pizza and sipped on sodas, Nathan insisted on hearing our side of the story. Brad told him how he'd first met Jet and I, how he quickly learned Jet was a shapeshifter but didn't know I was. I was still a bit confused as to why Brad couldn't see my aura the first time he searched, but I could only assume it had something to do with us being connected by the prophecy. In the middle of his story, Brad almost mentioned the prophecy, but I cut him off with a look. Even though Nathan claimed he was on our side, there was still a chance he was lying, and the prophecy was something I felt the need to keep to ourselves. Instead, Brad explained how he'd left with Jet in search of me (leaving out the part about finding me in a shapeshifter tribe). He told his father how we went to the prison in Arizona searching for information on Jet's mother, only to find the record of her death. Finally, he told him about Price being a sorcerer.

"We don't really know what his end game is," Brad said, "but we know it can't be good for shapeshifters."

Nathan sighed. "I can agree with you on that. As far as I know he's only got two shapeshifters captive at the moment." He looked over to me. "Your brother and a girl we caught passing through town."

"Do you know who the girl is?" Brad asked.

Nathan shook his head. "No. We haven't even managed to get her first name. She's so uncooperative."

I leaned forward, anxious for information. "What's Price been doing to them?"

"Actually, nothing," Nathan said, surprise in his tone. "Every time he goes to visit them, it seems like all he does is talk to them."

Jet put his elbows on the table. "Talks about what?"

"I'm not sure exactly. I know Price is looking for something. He always asks the girl and your brother the same question: where is it?"

"Where is what?"

Nathan shrugged. "Your brother's answer hasn't changed. He always says he doesn't know and I think he's telling the truth. But the girlâ€|she never gives him an answer. She refuses to speak. Which leads meâ€"and Priceâ€"to believe that she knows where whatever he's looking for is."

I thought about that. I had to agree with Nathan. Even though I

didn't know this girl, it did sound like she was withholding information. And while I didn't know what she was withholding, if Price wanted it, I was glad she wasn't talking.

"Wait," I said, remembering something, "When I was outside your house, Price received information about a new capture and then your wife mentioned something about her possibly knowing something and Price said that they were running out of time. Any idea what that was about?"

"Probably just the information he's hoping to get out of this girl. Price's got his own timeline, complete with deadlines which he doesn't always communicate with the rest of us."

"We need to figure out what he wants," I told the group. Both Brad and Jet nodded in agreement.

"Is that why you were following me, Marina?" Nathan asked.

I felt my cheeks heat up in embarrassment. I still couldn't believe I had been stupid enough to think I'd successfully followed Brad's father without him noticing. "Actually, no," I admitted. "I was hoping you'd lead me to where you're keeping my brother so I could get him out."

"They're being held in an office building off of main street," Nathan said without hesitation. "But you won't be able to get in."

"But I can't just leave him there," I said, a hint of desperation in my voice.

Nathan looked at me grimly. "I think you might have to. That place is more heavily guarded than our facility in Arizona, and if you're right about Price being a sorcerer, then you can be sure he added protective spells to the place too."

He must have noticed my defeated expression, because he continued hesitantly. "But I might be able to get you in just to talk to him."

I lifted my head. Talking was better than nothing. "How?"

"Well, you'd have to walk in dressed as a hunter," Nathan said, laying a hand on the table surface.

"That won't work," Jet butt in. "Even if she goes in as a hunter, if the place is as guarded as you say then they'll probably have a sorcerer guarding the place. He'll be able to take one look at her and see her aura. She'll be thrown in a cell within seconds."

I pursed my lips. He was right of course. Price wouldn't leave a couple humans to watch over his only two shapeshifter prisoners.

As an idea took shape in my head I smiled. "Then let's give Price a taste of his own medicine."

"What do you mean?" Brad asked.

I shifted in my seat. "Remember what Tommy said about auras being warm magic and being able to hide them if it was cold enough?"

Jet reached for my hand. "Yeah, but, Marina, he hid his aura by turning up the air conditioning in the entire room. We can't control the temperature in this office space."

"But maybe we don't need to," I said. "Your hunter uniforms have plenty of pockets and space in them, right? Maybe if we just stock those with ice, it'll be enough to hide my aura temporarily."

"That can't be all it takes," Brad said. "Tommy told us that no sorcerer had figured out how to do it without getting hypothermia and dying."

"Then we freeze the clothes before I put them on."

Jet frowned, taking both my hands. "You can't risk hypothermia for this. Cole wouldn't want you to do that."

I squeezed his hand. "But this is bigger than Cole now. Yes, I want to talk to him, but I need to talk to this other girl too. I need to find out what she knows that Price wants."

"Still," Jet said, "I'd be more comfortable if we got Tommy to cast a protection spell or something on you before you try to freeze to death."

I looked away, glancing at Brad. He, too, was hesitant to speak. Our expressions didn't go unnoticed by Jet.

"What is it?" he asked, "What aren't you telling me?"

I took a deep breath. "We don't really know if we can trust Tommy anymore."

"Why would you say that?"

"When I was in the school with Grace, she ran into him. He was talking to Price in the principal's office," I explained. "He didn't tell Price where we were hiding but it did sound like Tommy was taking orders from Price."

Jet frowned, taking in the new information. "That can't be right. You must have heard wrong."

"Maybe I did. But, we can't risk involving him right now. Just in case he is working for Price."

"Fine," Jet said, "But you can't give yourself hypothermia."

I thought about what he was saying. It, of course, wouldn't be that difficult to give myself hypothermia. The tricky part would be bringing my body temperature back up before any damage was done. "What if there was a way to cure my hypothermia almost immediately?"

"What are you thinking?" Brad asked.

"No way," Jet said at the same time.

I raised my eyebrows, glancing around the table.

"Go ahead, Marina," Nathan encouraged, "Let's hear your idea."

Jet glared at his biological father but kept his mouth shut, knowing I was going to talk regardless.

I took his silence as my cue. "Well, some animals' bodies allow them to function at varying temperatures."

"Are you referring to cold-blooded animals?"

Nodding, I continued. "If I can shift into one of those animals and then warm myself up, there shouldn't be any problem."

Jet rested his head in a hand. "And what if there is?"

Of course, there'd always be a risk. But I wasn't about to admit that to anyone. "There won't be," I said, filling my voice with conviction.

"It's not a bad plan," Nathan admitted.

Brad shot Jet a look that said: what-are-we-going-to-do? "We don't have any other ideas."

Jet closed his eyes for a few seconds, moving his hand to his forehead. He reopened them. "Alright." He sighed, giving in. "Let's do this."

Yes. I had a feeling this would work. And what was even better was that, with Nathan on our side, Price wouldn't suspect a thing. For once, we might actually get the jump on him. I couldn't wait to see the look on Price's face when we did.

35. Blackmail

****Wow, thank you soooo much for all of your reviews! Sorry this chapter is a bit later than I expected. July really flew by! Anyway, hope you enjoy reading this chapter. Please review and let me know what you think Price is up to! ****

Cole was being held in a real estate office on Main Street. I'd been freaking out and the whole time he was less than ten minutes away._ Figures._

The storefront looked the same as it always had: a quaint, picturesque main street address. It was sandwiched between a local beauty salon and the pizzeria my family and I used to go to after Cole would win one of his lacrosse games. The striped blue and white awning of the real estate office hung over the door in a forcibly cheerful way. I never would have suspected the welcoming space to be the headquarters for sorcerer-hunter collaborations. For some reason, in my head, I imagined a dark and damp abandoned building on the outskirts of town. Clearly Price thought it was better to remain in the center of the action.

Not that I could blame him. When I suggested that we hide at Bella's old house, I had been thinking the exact same thing. While being closer to the enemy was risky, it was necessary to be kept in the

loop regarding what was going on.

I shivered uncontrollably. I had been submerged in nothing but ice water for thirty minutes before getting in the car with Nathan and traveling into town. Ice packs were crammed in every one of the many concealed pockets of the hunter uniform I wore. The black shirt and pants themselves spent the night in the freezer. I was as close to hypothermic as anyone would dare get. Jet had insisted on taking my temperature before leaving just to make sure it was still above 95 degrees Fahrenheit. I refrained from clasping my hands together to keep them from shaking, knowing that would only heat my body back up faster.

"You alright?" Nathan whispered beside me.

I glanced to my right. Brad and Jet's father stood tall, his face an unemotional mask. Had I not heard the words out loud, I wouldn't have believed they'd come from the thin that was his mouth. He looked like the perfect, obedient soldier—exactly the kind of hunter Price wanted. And I had to look the same.

I fought for control of my skin and bones. I forced my body to remain still and pushed my shoulders back, lifting my chin. "Fine," I said seriously.

A guard stood rigid, much like Nathan, further down the hall. She would be our first test. If I made it by her okay then maybe, just maybe, this plan would work.

I made my steps match Nathan's, desperate to seem more like the soldier I was pretending to be than ever, as we slowly approached her. I was tempted to check the guard for an aura, but restrained myself. If she was a sorceress then she might recognize the look of one searching for an aura.

"Hello," Nathan said to the guard, not smiling. "We're here to talk with the prisoners."

The guard narrowed her eyes at me but didn't say a word. Like Nathan, I didn't smile, but, then again, that was the easy part. Even though I was about to see my brother, I wasn't here to rescue him, so I had little to smile about. She studied me for a moment before turning to let us pass.

I wanted to feel relieved that she didn't suspect me, but I had a feeling we were far from clear. With every step, I felt the weight of what I was risking by simply wanting to talk to my brother press harder on my shoulders. Sure, Brad waited outside in the car with Fallon, and I knew Jet was hidden somewhere nearby—but each of them ready to act should something go wrong—but was it really worth it? Especially for them? If something did go wrong, they could get hurt, or worse, killed, and then what? Whatever was going on was far from over and I knew I would need as many allies as I could get further down the line. I wished they would just leave me, but I knew they wouldn't do that—if they did, how could I possibly call them allies?

Nathan led the way down the hall to two adjoining doors. They looked like they led to any old offices, and yet, beside the handle were electronic key swipes and number pads. And those were only the

visible security measures. I was sure there had to be some sort of spell guarding each door as well. I just hoped that the spell didn't block shapeshifters from walking through them. But I didn't let that thought deter me. I hadn't turned back yet and I wasn't about to now that I knew Cole was on the other side of one of those doors.

Pulling a plain, unlabeled key card from a pocket in his jacket, Nathan swiped it and punched in a code. He then grasped the metal door handle. I counted one, two, three, four before there was an audible click and Nathan was able to press the handle down and open the door. He held out his arm, allowing me to enter.

"I'll wait outside," he told me.

I nodded silently. Hesitantly, I stepped into the room. It wasn't large, but I shouldn't really have expected it to be. It was an office. There was even a desk and filing cabinet pushed against the wall the door was on.

What surprised me most was that Cole was in his human form. I had assumed since the last I'd seen him he'd been forced into his tiger form that he'd still be in it. And yet, even though he was human, he didn't look like himself at all.

He was slumped up against a wall to the left, his head hidden under his arms. His brown hair looked wet, though, with a closer examination it could prove to simply be grease from a lack of wash. His ankle was chained to the wall, most likely using the same spell enhanced cuff that Nathan had used on me in the back of the van.

"Cole," I breathed.

He lifted his head at the sound of my voice, his eyes meeting mine.

They were dead. His eyes moved and held my gaze like normal but there was something missing in them. Something was horribly, dreadfully wrong. I suddenly knew that I couldn't just leave him here. I didn't care what it took. He looked beyond awful and he couldn't stay in the prison. My gut twisted at the thought of him dying in this makeshift cell.

"Marina?" he asked, his voice hoarse and lacking all of its usual conviction.

I rushed over to him, pulling on the chain linking him to the wall. "Yeah," I said, "I'm getting you out of here."

He glanced around the room and his eyes widened as if he'd just realized where he was. His hand reached out and snatched my own, stopping me from tugging on his chain.

"No," he said, his confidence returned.

"No?" I asked, "What do you mean no?"

He didn't answer. The dead look seeped back into his eyes.

"Cole?"

He looked down at the floor. His hand slipped away from mine. I desperately wanted to catch it and cling to it, but that would mean nothing if he didn't hold me back.

"Cole?" I tried again, "What's wrong?"

He remained silent. Part of me wondered if the boy before was even my brother at all. I had never seen him act this way: so downtrodden, so depressed, so defeated. Cole had never been one to give up. Even when his lacrosse in high school had been down by ten goals, he'd still be out there, giving it his all. He didn't even get this way when our dad was taken by the tribe. Instead, he'd stepped up to make sure everyone else was okay before himself.

"What's wrong?" I repeated.

Still nothing. He wouldn't even look at me. It was as if he couldn't bare to face me. Price had done something to him. That was the only reasonable explanation for his behavior. I swallowed hard at the images of Cole being magically tortured by the high school principal. And yet, Nathan had insisted that Price wasn't torturing the shapeshifters he was holding prisoner. But maybe it was some unseen torture.

"Cole!" I said in a clipped tone as loud as I dared. His head snapped up in my direction. Finally. I put my hand on his knee in an attempt to comfort him. "What happened?"

He let out a long breath and averted his eyes again. But this time, he spoke. "I can't shift," he whispered.

"What?"

"I can't shift," he said again, a bit louder this time.

I frowned. That hadn't been what I was expecting him to say. "What do you mean you can't shift?"

"I mean like I've tried and it's just not there."

I stared at him. He still refused to meet my eyes as if he was ashamed of himself. "Cole," I said softly. I gestured to the chain binding his ankle to the wall. "It's okay. It's probably just the cuff. It could be magically stopping you from shifting. I had one around my ankle that changed size with me as I shifted."

Cole shook his head. "It's not the cuff." He shifted, pressing his back up against the wall. "You know how when you shift you can feel your other form inside and you kind of reach for it and pull it out?"

"Yeah." I nodded. I knew exactly what he was talking about, except I could now feel basically an infinite number of different forms gathering inside me.

"Well," Cole said, propping his head up in his hand against his knee, "when I reach inside, there's nothing there."

I suddenly felt frozen insideâ€”and the feeling had nothing to do with the colder temperature my body was still experiencing. "I-I don't understand."

He shook his head again. "Neither do I. But the principal, Price, he did something. I don't know how but he took my tiger form from me."

No. That wasn't possible. I'd never heard of such a thing. We were born shapeshifters. A sorcerer couldn't just take that away. It was part of who we were.

Cole glanced back at the wall he sat against. "And, whatever he did, I think he's going to do it to her too."

"Her who?"

"The other shapeshifter, a girl," he said, "She's next door."

"Who is she?" I asked.

Cole shrugged. "No idea. I only saw her once and I didn't recognize her."

"And you're sure Price hasn't taken her animal form as well?" I asked, forcing the words from my mouth. The fact that this was even possible made me cringe inside.

"Yeah. He'll use it as leverage. From what I've heard, she refuses to tell him anything, even though she knows the answer."

"The answer to what?"

Cole ran a hand through his hair. "Price is trying to find the tribe."

I sat back on my heels. Of course. If he wanted shapeshifters why not go after an entire town of them?

"I talked," Cole said miserably, "but I had nothing to say. I don't know where the tribe is hidden." He looked up at me, eyes wide. He reached out and snatched my wrist. "You can't be here. You know where it is and, if Price catches youâ€”"

"Relax," I said soothingly. "He doesn't know I'm here. Why do you think I'm dressed as a hunter?"

He eyed me warily. "I don't care," he said, "You need to leave."

I shook my head. "I'm notâ€”"

"Shh!" Cole whispered, holding a hand to my mouth. He cocked his head to the left. I did the same, listening. Multiple footsteps sounded in the hall outside, growing louder the closer they got to the two doors. Glancing around the room, I looked for someplace to hide. I couldn't shift without leaving my uniform behind and that would only make anyone who came into the room suspicious. I scrambled across the floor, sliding under the desk just as I heard voices outside.

"Hello, sir," Nathan said in a formal tone.

I held my breath. Please don't be Price. Please don't be Price.

"Mr. Glenn," came Price's voice through the crack under the door.

Crap.

"Any changes from our prisoners?" Price asked.

"No, sir," Nathan said, "They're as quiet as usual."

"Okay, well let's see if we can get the one to talk," Price said.

Even though I didn't want Price finding out the location of the tribe, I found myself hoping he meant to interrogate the girl next door. If he came in Cole's room, he would not only find me there but he'd also recognize me, probably capture me, and then discover Brad's father is a traitor. And we really couldn't afford to have that happen.

A distinguished click sounded and I waited for Cole's door to open. It never did.

"So, you ready to talk?" Price asked, but his voice was slightly muffled.

"Marina," Cole whispered, "It's okay. He's in the other room."

I crawled back over to my brother and we both pressed our ears against the wall to listen better. Whoever the girl was, she didn't respond to Price.

"I know you know where I can find the tribe," Price continued, "All you have to do is give me the location and you'll be free to go."

The girl still say anything but I thought I heard a muffled scoff through the wall.

"I don't understand why you're protecting them," Price said. "They imprisoned you against your will. Surely you don't have any loyalty towards them."

Silence.

"It must really stink to finally have your freedom only to captured again. But look, I don't want to keep you here. I want to let you go. I really do. Except I can't do that unless you give me the location in return," Price persuaded.

He stopped talking for a minute. I pressed my ear to the wall harder, listening. But there was nothing to hear. The girl kept quiet.

Price sighed. "Fine," he said, "I was hoping to do this the easy way, but seeing as you refuse to tell meâ€¦You see, I've developed a new spellâ€¦a spell that can take away something very dear to you." He

paused, clearly hoping to get a reaction out of the girl. "You are awfully fond of being able to turn into that cat-like thing, aren't you?"

At that the girl seemed to find her voice. "Lynx," she muttered bitterly.

"Tell me where to find them and I'll let you keep your lynx," Price said, his satisfaction seeping through the sheetrock.

"You promise not to hurt them?" the girl asked.

I frowned, listening more closely. My ear ached from pushing it against the wall so hard. The girl's voice sounded familiar. I knew I'd heard it somewhere before, but I couldn't remember where. Who did I know who could turn into a lynx?

"Of course not," Price said, "I just want to offer them a proposition. One that could free them from their current oppressor."

Whoever this girl was, she couldn't actually be buying what the principal was saying. Surely she knew he was lying just to get what he wanted.

"Okay," the girl whispered, "It's in Utah. Up in the mountains, near Salt Lake City."

Even though I couldn't see it, I knew Price was smiling. "Good girl." The door opened. "Release her," he said to someone out in the hall.

"But sir?" a guard questioned. Apparently releasing prisoners was not common behavior.

The principal betrayed nothing. "We made a deal," he told the guard. "She is free to go."

The sound of clinking of chains falling to the floor reached me through the wall. I couldn't believe Price was keeping his word. Multiple footsteps left the room, some continuing back down the hall. A couple seconds passed before someone spoke.

"Sir?" Nathan asked. Apparently Price hadn't left yet. "I thought we weren't releasing any prisoners."

"We weren't," Price said, "but it doesn't matter. Besides, it's not like we won't be following her."

I turned back to Cole. "I have to get you out of here," I whispered. "I don't know how, but I'll figure out a way to get your tiger form back."

Cole grabbed my hand. "Marina," he said, staring into my eyes, "stop. Don't worry about me."

"Why?" I asked, "It was wrong of Price to take it from you. It's part of who you are. You didn't deserve that."

Cole shook his head sadly. "Yes, I do."

"What are you talking about? No you don't," I said adamantly.

He let out a shaky breath. "This is my punishment."

"Punishment?" I frowned. He wasn't making any sense. "We need to get out of here. Maybe Nathan has a key." I reached for the cuff around his ankle, studying the lock.

"Marina."

I looked up at my older brother.

"You need to leave me."

"No, I won't"

"Marina, listen to me." He grasped my hand. "This is my punishment for killing Principal Wang."

I stopped breathing for a second. "That's ridiculous," I told him, refusing to believe his words. "You didn't actually kill Grace's father."

"They have it on film," he said.

I froze.

"It was me. I don't remember doing it, but it was definitely me. I did it. I attacked him and killed him."

I gulped. I didn't want to believe it. But Cole wasn't joking around. I could see it in his face. He was devastated. He felt guilty and I could see that it had broken him inside.

The door swung open and Nathan stood in its place. "We need to get you out of here, now," he said.

I glanced once more at Cole before nodding to Brad's father and standing. I followed him out the door and down the hall, feeling helpless and even slightly hopeless.

He leads me back out the way we came, passed the same guard. She doesn't say anything to us. I look around, just waiting to Price to turn the corner and spot me but he never does. Apparently, wherever he disappeared to, he wasn't about to cross paths with me.

As we approached the front door, I spotted another guard and a girl with dark brown hair and a bunch of jagged scars covering the back of her legs. She was escorted outside while Nathan and I followed close behind. She made her way across the street towards a patch of trees, but, before she disappeared, she turned and met my eyes.

Drew.

I didn't know how, but somehow she'd escaped the prison back in the tribe, just like she told me she would. Apparently, she'd been right: she hadn't needed my help. But now she'd betrayed the tribe. Of course, she didn't owe them anything. And yet, didn't she hold any loyalty toward shapeshifters in general?

She turned back around and ran into the trees, not giving me a second thought. I realized it was foolish of me to think she'd be concerned about the shapeshifters back in the tribe. She was only worried about herself. I guess that's what happened when you spent your life on the run.

I stared after her. Because of Drew, Price now knew the location of the tribe. I didn't know what he had planned, but it definitely wasn't a proposition like he'd told Drew.

Turning, I rushed ahead of Nathan to the car. I had to tell Fallon what I'd overheard.

36. Vanishing Act

**Has it really been a whole month since I last updated? Wow, sorry, I honestly don't know where that time went. But, I guess I can say that I took that time to finally plan out the end of this story. So I now know exactly what happens at the end of this book. That's good right? Except that there's only about ten chapters left before it's all over. :(**

**Anyway, thank you, thank you, thank you for your incredible reviews. Please continue to let me know what you think! And now onto the next chapter! **

From the time the car door closed, things escalated quickly. Jet must have seen Drew come out of the building or the look on my face when I did, because he rushed from his hiding spot to join the rest of us in the car. For a moment I feared he wouldn't make it. That Price would storm from the real estate office and capture Jet, put him in the room beside my brother, and rip the wolf out of him. I pictured him writhing in pain, his body twisting and contorting in unnatural ways as Price tore him in half.

The sound of the passenger door slamming shut woke me from my nightmare. Jet was safe inside the car with us and he was still a wolf. Nathan didn't say a word as he calmly backed out of the parking spot and drove away from the office building.

Sandwiched between Fallon and Brad in the backseat, I began removing the ice from the pockets of my clothing, turning over what I'd learned in my mind. Even with packets of ice tucked away in hidden compartments, I realized I was no longer shivering. Fallon and Brad's body heat must have been enough to warm me. Still, I searched for the bags of ice, needing to occupy my hands. I knew if I didn't keep them busy they'd start shaking and it would have nothing to do with the ice.

We had barely made it passed Main Street when Fallon opened her mouth, no doubt unable or unwilling to restrain herself. "Well," she started, glancing at me but not meeting my eyes, "What happened? Did you get to see Cole?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"And what'd he say?" she asked, pressing me for information.

Brad leaned forward to shoot a glare at Fallon.

Her determination faltered. "I mean, is he okay?"

I crossed my arms over my stomach, my hands patting down my sides in search of additional ice packs, but there was none there. I silently counted the number on the floor in front of me. Twelve. I'd found them all. There were no more to left to find.

Reality hit me hard. Like a gust of wind strong enough to knock me off my feet.

Price had taken Cole's animal form from him. He'd created a spell that couldâ€|neutralize shapeshifters. He had the power to make us normal. To make us vulnerable. And he could make me vulnerable. How was I supposed to defeat him if I couldn't shift?

I looked down at my hands. They were shaking.

A sinking feeling filled me, pressing me down into the fabric of the seat, like heavy snow being packed on top of my shoulders. I couldn't. I couldn't defeat Price if I was normal. I didn't even stand a chance. For the first time it occurred to me that maybe I wasn't supposed to be the victorious oneâ€|that maybe Price was destined to win and wipe the existence of shapeshifters from the Earth. The end of the prophecy stated that "only one could join the sun at dawn." That one didn't have to be me. I could be the one who doesn't get to see another sunrise.

"Marina?"

Brad's voice flitted to me through my haze of thoughts.

A soft whimper followed by the feeling of fur against the back of my hands brought me back to the car. Jet had crawled over the console between the two front seats to rest his head against my shaking hands. I reached for him, entangling my fingers in his fur and taking comfort in his familiarity. My shaking hands steadied.

"Cole's alive," I told the car, "but he's not okay."

"What did Price do to him?" Fallon asked as she lay a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

Had the situation not been so dire I would have laughed at Fallon's attempt at sympathy. But it was and Price had the extinction of shapeshifters in his sights. I just wished I knew why he wanted that. Or why it was up to me to stop himâ€|if that was even possible.

I took a deep breath. I had to take things one step at a time. I could figure out the why and the how later. Right now, I needed to relay what I'd learned to Fallon, Brad, and Jet.

"Cole isn't hurt," I explained, "Price created a new spell though."

"Another one?" Brad asked, brow furrowing.

I clutched Jet, nodding. "This one is worse than exposing people as shapeshifters."

"How so?"

"It rips out a shapeshifter's animal form. Takes it away so you can't shift." I shuddered, once again imagining what Cole had to have gone throughâ€"what Jet or I could go throughâ€"to end up so dead inside.

Around me the car is silent.

I glanced up and met Nathan's eyes in the rearview mirror. This shouldn't have come as a surprise to him. He had to have overheard Price talking to Drew too. But it was possible he hadn'tâ€"that the insulation between the rooms and the hall was thicker than that between the rooms.

He looked away, eyes traveling sideways to Jet. I briefly wished I could read his thoughts. Was he thinking of ways to protect his newfound son? Or was he hoping he could get Price to use the spell on Jet so it'd be easier to welcome him into his family? I sincerely hoped it was the former. Nathan should accept Jet for who he is not who he could be.

I looked down at Jet, but he couldn't care less how his birth father was reacting to the news. His eyes never left me. He was only concerned with how I was taking the discovery. I wondered how much he saw through. Did he know how worried I was? Did he know I was actually terrified?

"Why would Price want to take away shapeshifters power?" Brad thought aloud.

"I don't know," I answered. "Maybe to make himself more powerful?"

"He's already got the hunters and a bunch of sorcerersâ€"Tommy included probablyâ€"in his pocket," Fallon pointed out. "When is his power stomach going to be satiated?" She smirked in an attempt to lift the mood.

But she wasn't helping and I knew it'd drop back down as soon as I told her everything. "There's more," I said, "Cole wasn't the only shapeshifter imprisoned there. Price captured Drew too."

"Drew?" Fallon repeated. "As in miss I-can-get-myself-out?"

"Yup. She told Price where he could find the tribe," I said, "and I think Price is planning on attacking the tribe."

"What?!" Fallon shrieked. The reassuring hand on my shoulder immediately disappeared. "We have to stop him. We have to warn them."

"I thought you hated the tribe," Brad said.

"I do." Fallon narrowed her eyes at Brad.

"Then why wouldâ€" "

"My family is still in there," she spat. "And while everyone in the

tribe treated me like I was an infectious disease and the council refused to let me leave, they still don't deserve to _die. _Because don't think Price will attack without causing any casualties."

The car was silent.

I had to agree with her. Even if killing the shapeshifters in the tribe isn't a part of Price's plan, any battle between sorcerers, hunters and shapeshifters won't result in at least some amount of carnage. But what could we do? Price may very well be on his way to the tribe right at that moment. And what if it was all a diversion? What if Price was really targeting the tribe to get to us?

Nathan pulled up to Bella's old house and we all piled out of the car. I followed everyone up to the house, closing the front door behind me. As soon as the door shut, the hall erupted in noise.

"Marina!" Skye called to me.

I looked up, realizing I'd been staring down at the black, combat boots I still wore. I jerked back a step when I saw how crowded the front hall was. Jet had shifted back into his human form and was currently adjusting a pair of shorts. Brad and Fallon had started arguing again. Grace and Kayleigh had returned and Grace was now yelling something about why Nathan was here, saying he was the enemy. Skye was trying to get my attention. But what probably surprised me the most was that my mother was among those in the crowded hall.

"Mom?" I frowned, wondering what the hell she was doing here.

"Marina!" she gasped and pushed her way through everyone to wrap her arms around me.

My mother's arms protected me from the chaos that surrounded us, but I couldn't bring myself to hug her back. I just didn't understand why she was here. Fallon had said she was at staying at home and fending off busybody sorcerers with ridiculous threats.

She pulled back to get a good look at me. Tucking a stray hair behind my ear, she asked, "How are you? You okay?"

"I'm fine, Mom," I said, "but what are you doing here?"

My mom looked around the hall, pursing her lips at the amount of yelling taking place. "Let's go someplace a bit quieter." She took my hand and led me upstairs, pulling me into the master bedroom. Skye followed us, closing the door behind her and shutting out most of the noise.

"Now," my mom started, still looking me up and down, "Marina, are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, Mom," I told her again. "What are you doing here?"

"Skye said that you were trying to get in to see Cole. I need to know if my children are alright."

I turned to shoot a glare at Skye. She knew our mother could be a worry-wart. She'd been the one to institute the "no running off and shifting alone" rule when we were younger, not my father. And she'd also been the one I'd been afraid would pick up our family and move if she found out about the siren last year.

"So, how's Cole?" my mom asked, eyes wide with concern. They were also tinged red from crying. For some reason, it never occurred to me how hard this was on my mom. My dad was still a prisoner in the tribe. Cole was Price's prisoner. And Skye and I were in hiding. She was currently all alone in our house. Her family gone.

I swallowed, weighing my options. I could lie and tell her Cole was fine or I could tell her the truth and have her worry even more. "Cole isâ€¦" I started, "He'sâ€¦"

She looked at me expectantly, her features constricting in anger the more I hesitated to talk.

"He's okay," I said finally. "They have him holed up in one of the real estate offices on Main Street."

She visibly relaxed at my words but then narrowed her eyes at me. "And?"

"And what?" I asked, nervously shifting from one foot to the other under the weight of her gaze.

"And what else?" she clarified, watching me carefully. "What aren't you telling me, Marina?"

I broke down. I couldn't help it. Moms have the power over you. I told her everything. About Nathan helping us, what Cole said about not being able to shift and killing Grace's father, and finally Price's plan for the tribe. She listened to it all. Neither her nor Skye interrupting me. When I'd finished she pulled me in for another hug.

"That's it," she said, running her hand along my ponytail and twirling a piece of hair at the end around her finger. "No more. We're leaving."

I snapped away from her like a coiled spring let loose. "What?"

She glanced back at Skye then reached her hand out to squeeze my arm. "We should have left months agoâ€¦"when we first learned about the hunters."

"We can't go," I said without a thought.

My mom frowned with her eyebrows. "It's not safe for you here," she said, "I've already had one child taken from me and I won't have another one."

"Mom, I can't just leave," I told her, begging her to understand.

"If this is about John, I don't have a problem with him coming with us."

I threw my hands out in front of me. "No, this isn't about Jet," I said. "Look, I'm needed here. The prophecyâ€"

"Marina June Keller! I don't care about the damn prophecy!" she yelled, her anger leaking out like someone had just turned the hose on high.

I took a step back. I knew she was angry. I knew she was scared. So was I. But I still couldn't give her what she wanted.

She took a deep breath in. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but I need my children to be safe."

"I won't be," I whispered.

"What?"

"I won't be safe," I said a bit louder. "I'm the 'one of many forms,' Mom. I can turn into any animal. Price is going after the tribe because he wants me." As soon as the words left my lips I knew they were true. "He's hunting me. No matter where I go he'll follow."

"We don't have to stay in one place," she said, her voice much softer as if she knew she was fighting a losing battle.

I shook my head. "Then we'd be running away. You taught me that I can't run away from my problems and I'm not going to start now."

She sighed, closing her eyes and pursing her lipsâ€"something she used to do whenever she was faced with putting one of us in timeout. "Okay," she said. "You can stay, but I'm taking Skye and going to your grandparents for a little while."

"I'm not leaving!" Skye said, piping up for the first time.

My mom turned to glare at her second daughter, but Skye only crossed her arms and glared back.

She threw her head back and groaned. "Alright, fine," she said, giving in completely. "I suppose I can't very well leave one daughter here alone and take the other." She raised a finger, pointing it between me and Skye. "But, from now on, you tell me everything." Her eyes wandered over to my guilty face. "And you don't go anywhere without me," she added, turning on Skye.

Skye's face burst into a wide grin. "Deal."

"Fine," I lied. I couldn't promise that I would tell my mom everything. I knew there would be some things I would have to keep to myselfâ€|and maybe Jet. "We're going back to the tribe to try and stop Price."

My mom raised her eyebrows at me but didn't protest.

I shrugged. "You said you wanted to know everything."

She sighed and pinched the spot on her nose between her eyes. Biting my lip, I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. She was just worried about me and I couldn't blame her for that. She was my

mom.

"I love you," I said, hiding my face on her shoulder and breathing in her scent of clean laundry and fresh lavender.

She kissed the side of my head. "I love you too, sweetie."

I pulled away then and, giving her a soft smile, left the room. The noise hit me like a gust of wind. People were yelling—a lot of people. I rushed down the stairs, confronted by a shouting match at the bottom of them.

"Get out!" Grace yelled at Nathan.

"I'm here to help," Nathan responded.

"For the last time, he's on our side!" Jet desperately shouted, coming to his birth father's defense for the first time.

"How can you be so sure?" Kayleigh asked, raising her own voice.

"There's no point! We need to stay here!" Brad yelled at Fallon.

"No point?!" Fallon screamed back at him. "My family is there you asshole!"

A soft, "Woah," sounded in my ear. I turned to see Skye standing behind me with our mom on the stairs just behind her, her eyes wide. I didn't need a mirror to know my face was an echo of my sister's.

This was ridiculous. Shouting at each other would get us no where. And we were wasting time.

"I'm leaving for the tribe right now," I roared causing everyone else to fall silent. "Anyone coming with me better follow me out the door this second." I marched down the rest of the stairs and pushed through my friends to the front door, Fallon on my heels.

Brad grabbed my arm, pulling me to a stop. "Marina, are you sure that's a good idea?"

I knew he had a point, but the more I thought about it the more I knew staying wasn't an option. And that going was the right thing to do. "Are you coming or not?"

He let go of my arm and nodded. "I'll drive. I know the way."

Less than five minutes later, Fallon, Brad, Jet and I had piled into Brad's charger. Nathan elected to stay behind to try to discover more about Price's plans while Grace said she would call Annie and Connor and Skye promised she'd make sure everyone got along.

Sitting in the backseat beside Jet, I couldn't help but think of how the last time the four of us had been in Brad's car together we'd been escaping the prison in Arizona—and there'd been two other people with us. One of them had been Eloise. But the other—the other had been Tommy, my oldest friend. And now my oldest friend wouldn't talk to me and seemed to be working for my

enemy.

//*/*

My hand remained clasped in Jet's during the entire ride. Up front, Fallon's gaze stayed on all the mile markers we passed while Brad's switched between the road ahead and Fallon, worry creasing his forehead. It was in the early hours of the morning when we finally arrived but that didn't mean anyone was asleep. No sooner had Brad put the car in park than everyone was out in the frigid air.

We raced through the woods, weaving in and out of tree trunks. The snow on the ground was wet, already melting away. I remembered how thick it'd been. I retraced my steps, following the path I'd taken with Jet and Fallon only a week before. Had it really only been one week since I'd escaped? It felt like much longer.

Beside me, Fallon slipped and fell in the slush of snow but popped right back up, pushing on. Though she'd never admit it, I could see the worry and desperation in her eyes. Even though she left them, she still cared about her family, still loved them, and she didn't want to see them hurt.

At last we reached the last stretch—an upward trek indicated by the increasing incline. All we had to do was reach the top and the tribe would be visible. Fallon rushed forward, pulling ahead of the rest of us. She reached the top and disappeared from view.

I pushed myself to run faster. Pulling myself up to the top, I spotted Fallon immediately. She stood frozen, staring at the place that had imprisoned her her whole life.

Slowly, I approached her. "Fallon? What is it?"

She swallowed hard. "Look," she said, raising her hand to point at a spot ahead of us.

I followed her direction to the beginnings of the tribe. I could see the path I had first taken in the middle of the night that led directly into the tribe, a few of the buildings in the south corner just visible through the trees. I frowned, not understanding what she wanted me to see. My eyes scanned the perimeter of the tribe. Then I understood.

There was no fence. No gate. No giant doors. The thirty foot fence that not only kept people out but also in was gone. There were no remnants of it either. No fallen tree trunks. No nothing. It was like the fence just vanished—like magic.

We were too late. "Oh no."

37. Alternate Trip

**Thank you to those who reviewed! You guys are literally the best. Wow. Okay, so long chapter. Possibly my longest ever, but I really felt the need to make up for the last chapter which I now realize was mostly filler. So, that said, for those of you theorizing, be sure to read this chapter very closely. There are a lot of clues in it, some more hidden than others. I hope you enjoy reading this chapter and

please review! I would love to know what you think. :)**

The aftermath of a battle is not silent.

The wind rustles debris. Unrestrained water laps into the soil. Fires spark and crackle in search of new fuel. And survivors go on.

The tribe was not a graveyard.

The four of us walked together along the path that would lead us to the center of the tribe. Fallon bit her lip to try to keep from crying, her eyes scanning the traumatized faces we passed. Brad kept one hand on the waistband of his jeans where I knew he had a pistol hidden beneath his t-shirt on the lookout for lingering danger. Jet grasped my hand, but his eyes searched the wreckage surrounding us, his mouth sewn shut in a thin line. I was hollow. An empty shell that air simply passed through. And everything I saw couldn't have been real.

A choking sound escaped Fallon's throat. I followed her gaze to see an older man on the ground beneath the remnants of a window frame. His legs were bent the wrong way, as if someone had turned his knees around, and blood seeped from his open eyes, crimson tears cracking his cheeks. I recognized him. He'd been one of the elders of the tribe. I remembered him saying that I required physical as well as shifting training.

I looked away, feeling my stomach turn over at the sight of the mangled body. My eyes fell on Fallon. Her eyes were squeezed shut as if she could shut out the scene around her, but a single tear escaped her lids and slid down her cheek.

Brad stared at her. Slowly, he raised his hand. It hovered beside her cheek, uncertain, fingers trembling. Then he reached out and gently brushed the tear away. Fallon opened her eyes, locking with Brad's clear blue.

We kept moving. The closer we got to the center of the town, the more people we saw. Yes, there were those that had fallen, but there were still people who were phoenixes, who had endured and had risen from the ashes.

Ahead of us, a girl with long, flaming, red hair stood wrapping a man's wrist in bandages. There was dirt smeared across her forehead and a line of dried blood flowed from her nose down over her lips, but it was still clear that she and Fallon looked exactly alike.

"Mom. Dad. Fawn," Fallon gasped before breaking away from our group and rushing over to her family. Her mother greeted her by enveloping her in her arms, clutching Fallon in a way only a mother could. A happy family reunion amongst loss and pain.

I needed to find my own father.

"Marina?"

I turned at the sound of my name. But it wasn't my dad.

Taz stood before me, his eyebrows furrowed. His arm was in a sling

and a gash on the side of his head had scraped away a section of his hair, leaving only crusted over blood.

"Taz," I said, affirming that he was really there. "Are you okay?"

He looked down at his arm and sighed. "A little broken," he said, "but I'll live." His frown deepened as his eyes moved beyond me to all the broken people of the tribe. Unlike his mother and father, I could see how much Taz truly cared about people.

"What happened?" I asked. On some level I already knew what had gone on here, but I still felt the need to ask. "I needed to know exactly why Price had wrecked these people's lives.

"We were attacked by hunters," Taz said, glancing briefly at Brad. Perhaps on some level he could sense the danger Brad could pose to him as a hunter. "But not all of them were hunters. Some were"

"Sorcerers," Jet finished for him, practically spitting the word from his lips as if it bit his tongue.

Taz nodded. "I don't understand why sorcerers would. I mean we're supposed to all supernaturals have always been peaceful with one another."

I curled my lips in. "Just" I started, "Just tell us what the hunters and sorcerers did."

Taz's eyes found Fallon surrounded by her family. "You know I always suspected that she ran away with you," he said. He turned his gaze back to me. "The sorcerers performed a spell that made the fence disappear and then the hunters rushed in." He closed his eyes before recounting the rest of the story. "Some of us immediately shifted to defend ourselves but I couldn't. It didn't matter though. It was like the hunters had an infinite amount of ammunition. They shot tranquilizer darts at anyone and everyone. It didn't matter if they were in human or animal form. Those who struggled got shot. And those who didn't were brought to the center square." He sighed. "They rounded up as many of us as they could. The sorcerers were waiting for us in the center square. One man walked among the kneeling and unconscious bodies. I stood, demanding that he take me and leave everyone else alone. He stopped behind me and, for a minute, I thought he'd listen. Then he laid his hands on my shoulders and I felt him pull my animal form out of me."

"Did he say anything?"

Taz shook his head. "Whispered words I didn't understand. When he was done with me, he moved on to someone else and took their animal form too. He did this to everyone they found while the other sorcerers and hunters restrained them."

"Is there anyone who still has their animal form?" I asked.

"A few people I think," Taz said, "Children who managed to hide mostly."

"What about the chief and Yvette?"

"Marina," Jet said as he nudged my side and pointed to his right.

I looked over in the direction he was pointing to see my father heading towards us. "Dad," I breathed before pushing passed Jet and running to my father.

Catching sight of me, my dad's face broke into a smile and he stretched his arms out for me to run into. "Marina," he whispered in my ear and kissed me on the top of my head. Pulling back, he tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Marina, what are you doing here?" he asked. "Are you okay?"

I smiled back at him. "I'm fine, Dad," I said, "perfectly normal."

"Can you still shift?" he asked, eyes traveling over me, looking for damage.

"Yeah. Like I said, I'm absolutely normalâ€¦for me."

He nodded, smiling sadly.

Something about his expression reminded of what Taz just said: how anyone the hunters and sorcerers found had their animal form ripped out of them. "Dad," I started hesitantly, "can _you_ shift?"

He didn't answer right away. Finally, he smiled at me again and said, "No, sweetie. I had my mountain lion taken from me too."

I swallowed hard. Despite being held prisoner in the tribe, I had always seen my father as invincible. I never imagined that he would fall prey to Price as well.

"Excuse me, Marina?"

I turned to once again to find Taz standing tall behind me.

"I apologize for interrupting your reunion," he said formally, "but I was wondering if I could speak to you alone for a moment."

I glanced back at my father before nodding and following Taz to an area that was more secluded.

"You know who attacked the tribe," Taz said as soon as we were out of earshot. It wasn't a question but a factual statement. And I didn't bother denying it. He continued, "John knew that sorcerers came with the hunters and you didn't seem surprised when I said one was taking away animals forms. I need to protect these people and to do that I need to know what you know."

I consented, telling him what I knew and suspected about Price. Taz listened patiently, crossing his arms over his chest, but never interrupting me.

"So what does Price want with our animal forms?" he asked.

"I don't know," I admitted. "At first I thought it was just to make us powerless, but I'm not so sure anymore. I think he's trying to find me. If he really wants shapeshifters then what better prize than

one with an infinite number of forms?"

A smile snaked its way onto Taz's face.

"What?"

He shook his head. "I knew you were faking it during those training sessions."

I could feel my cheeks heat up in embarrassment. "Oh, uh," I stuttered, avoiding eye contact, "yeah, sorry about that."

He shrugged it off. "I understand why you did it. My father wanted you as his pet and no one should have to go through that."

"You included," I said before I could think. I looked down at the ground again, outlining a melted snow puddle with the edge of my toe. "And thanks. Umm, speaking of your father—where is he?"

Taz frowned and glanced around to make sure no one was listening to us. "I didn't want to say this earlier because I don't want it getting around." He exhaled angrily, causing his nostrils to flare. It would have been comical had we not been surrounded by so much grief and fear. "The hunters and sorcerers took him."

"Because he's the—"

Taz cut me off. "No. He surrendered to them. He didn't put up a fight at all. Didn't even shift. They stormed into our house and he just offered them his hands."

"What?" I asked, exasperated. That didn't make any sense. "But, why?"

Taz shook his head. "No idea." He gritted his teeth, looking down at me. "What's worse is that as they were leading him out _he was smiling_. As if it was exactly what he wanted."

I frowned. I didn't know the chief very well, but I did know that Sebastian craved power. How would surrendering to a sorcerer help him obtain power over the tribe? Unless he was hoping to capture me again. Even so, how could he know that Price was my high school principal? Knots of thoughts tangled in my head, impossible to pull apart.

I narrowed my eyes up at Taz. There was something else bothering me. Something he'd mentioned earlier. "Before you said that when the attack started, some people shifted to defend themselves but that you couldn't. Not that you didn't but that you _couldn't__t_. And you hadn't had your animal form taken yet."

Taz raised his eyebrows at me. "You picked up on that, huh? Guess I shouldn't be surprised that I'm not the only one who can see through people." He ran a hand through his hair. "Had I shifted, I could have caused more injuries and destruction than the attack did."

Speculations swirled in my head. Did he not have control over his animal side? Were there actually shapeshifters out there that were mindless predators? Taz was such a nice guy, not to mention a bit of

a geek. Had he killed someone? It seemed unlikely. And yet there was always the possibility that we'd been wrong. Could the hunters have had the right idea?

"I have to be far away from the tribe when I do shift," Taz continued, not allowing me to voice any of my thoughts. That was probably for the best. I already felt guilty for them.

"When my father first shifted, and everyone discovered he was a dragon, that was when people realized mythical creatures weren't exactly myths." Taz gaze wandered around at all the people shuffling around the town. "When I first shifted, we discovered that mythical creatures run in our family."

I frowned. "But animal forms aren't passed down in families. Only the gene to shift is."

Taz nodded. "I know. But I'm beginning to think that the animal forms that exist within families follow a pattern."

"And you think mythical creaturesâ€”like dragonsâ€”run in your family?" I asked. I wondered if he'd shared this theory with anyone else.

He raised his eyebrows and sighed. "Have you ever heard the legends of the thunderbird?"

I shook my head, but if the animal was anything like its name I could pretty much guess what it was.

"According to legend, the thunderbird is a giant eagle-like bird thought to mirror the spirits. It's wingspan is probably equivalent to the length of a quarter of a football field."

"You know how big a football field is?" I asked, raising my eyebrows and holding back a smirk.

He smiled. "We may live in the middle of the forest but we're not isolated from the world. I happen to be a huge Denver Broncos fan."

I tilted my head to the side. Right. I definitely didn't peg Taz for a football guy. "Okay, so a thunderbird is basically a giant eagle?"

Taz wavered. "Yes and no. In size and appearance, I suppose so, but that's not where the legend ends," he said. "Just as dragons breathe fire, thunderbirds have a unique ability as well."

I stared at him, waiting for him to continue.

"My guess is that it has to do with a thunderbird's size and wingspan, but when they flap their wings they can influence the winds."

I frowned. "Influence the winds?"

Taz nodded. "Change the direction of the wind, create it even."

"And you can turn into a thunderbird when you shift?" I asked, seeing

him in a new light. I had seen all along how much Taz cares for the tribe and wondered why he didn't overthrow his father when he became of age. I'd always assumed it was because he was afraid of his father, but now I suspected that perhaps it was for a whole other reason.

"The first time I shifted and tried to fly, I ripped half a dozen trees out of the ground and injured four people, my younger sister included." His voice was quiet when he spoke, haunted. "It's not that I can't shift, it's that I refuse to. I won't hurt anyone ever again."

I smiled at Taz. "I understand." I had no doubt that he would make a great leader, but I wondered what it was like for him to be surrounded by shapeshifters and never shift himself. Much like Fallon felt I was sure.

"Marina?"

Speak of the devil. I turned to find that it wasn't Fallon interrupting me but her twin, Fawn. Her hair was just as red, but it was much longer and currently a tangled mess in the aftermath of battle. The scar on her knee was just visible through a rip on her jeans.

"I-I have," she mumbled.

She seemed nervous, but I had a feeling it had nothing to do with the fact that she was talking to me. I could easily remember the smirk on her face when Yvette forced me to shift in the middle of the square.

She took a deep breath in. Looking me in the eye, she said, "I have a message for you from the sorcerer who attacked the tribe."

I took a step back, more than shocked, while Taz took a step forward. That certainly hadn't been what I was expecting her to say. Gathering myself, I nodded. "Okay, what did he say?"

She visibly swallowed. "He said that you should meet him on the secluded beach near Hollister Avenue at midnight in three days," she relayed.

The secluded beach near Hollister Avenue? That was the secret beach I used for shifting. There was no way that was a coincidence. But how had Price found out about it? My breath caught in my throat when the answer came to me. Tommy. He'd really betrayed us. I hadn't wanted to believe it before, but now I couldn't deny what was staring me in the face.

I looked up at Fawn. "Thank you," I told her. She had to have been scared out of her mind when Price picked her out of the crowd to deliver a message to me.

"There's more," she said quickly, eyes wide. "He also said that you should come alone and that if you don't show up, he-he'll kill your brother."

My heart grew heavy at her words. Price was going to kill Cole? I quickly wiped away a gathering tear from the corner of my eye,

nodding. "Right. Thanks," I told her.

She turned to go back to her family.

"And Fawn?"

She looked back at me over her shoulder.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you," I said.

Something sparked in her eyes. A smile crept across her face. "Don't be sorry," she said, a strength in her voice that had been missing a moment ago. "Promise that you'll help me get my fox back."

Maybe she and Fallon weren't as different as I thought. "I promise," I swore. I glanced around at all the people moving through the tribe. I was going to make sure they all were safe from Price.

"Funny," Taz said beside me.

"What's that?"

He made eye contact with me. "I made myself a similar promise."

I turned my body towards him. What was he talking about?

Taz stood up a bit straighter. "Marina, I know about the prophecy, but I also know that the sorcerer is too strong for you to defeat on your own," he said. "I would like to volunteer, along with a number of my fellow tribesmen, to return to California with you to help fight him."

I took another step back, surprised all over again. "But he could kill you," I said. "You just heard what Fawn said. Price already threatened to kill my brother. He didn't kill you here, but I don't think he'll hesitate to do so if you show up on that beach."

"I realize that, and so does everyone else who wants to fight. But that won't stop them. Price and his followers took more from us than our animal forms, and we intend to get everything back."

I studied him for a moment. He wasn't going to give in. He and who knew how many others were set on this. And who was I to say no?

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Two hours later, I was back in Brad's car on my way home. On the road behind us were two vans exactly like the one I was forced into when I was kidnapped a few weeks ago. Taz, Fawn, my father and sixteen other tribe members were following us to California in hopes of defeating Price and retrieving what was stolen from them.

But their presence didn't comfort me. If anything, I felt like I was leading them into a tangled web of confusion. I knew Price wanted me because I was the multiple shapeshifter. I knew he could take shapeshifter's animal forms. But other than that I knew next to nothing. I didn't know why Price was doing all this. What was the purpose of all this? Why attack the tribe instead of going straight after me? And why would the chief hand himself over instead of

fighting? Nothing made sense and it frustrated me to no end.

I really hated not knowing things. Before I didn't understand Jet's determination to discover what Bella was or Tommy's eagerness to learn everything there was to know about supernaturals, but now I could. I saw how crucial information could be. I desperately wished I had more information than I did, or a way to get more.

Wait. I did.

"Brad!" I exclaimed, swiveling around in my seat.

Brad sat beside Fallon in the backseat, slumped over, eyes closed, mouth open, and head resting on Fallon's shoulder: sound asleep.

Fallon glared at me, pressing a finger to her lips, motioning for me to keep quiet.

I ignored her. I knew Brad was tired from driving twelve hours straight to get to the tribe in the first place, but this was important. And I had no idea how much time we'd have when we got home. We had another eleven hours worth of time in the car. He could sleep after I tested my theory.

"Brad!" I said again, louder this time.

Brad blinked, pulling himself out of the fog of sleep. He looked up at Fallon, and seeing he was lying against her, quickly sat up. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he blinked again and looked at me. "Yeah?"

"Remember how we went back in time and were temporarily transferred into the bodies of Roe and Luka?"

Brad wrinkled his nose. "Vividly."

"Right. Anyway, I think I know how we triggered it," I said.

"And?" Fallon asked, still glaring at me a bit.

"I want to test it." I stared at Brad.

"You want to go back there?" Jet asked from the driver's seat beside me. "Weren't you almost killed by that demon thing?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, but I escaped."

Fallon looked over at Brad. "And didn't you say you thought some arrogant sorcerer was trying to brainwash the people?"

"Yeah, something about that guy really rubbed me the wrong way," Brad admitted.

"But our connections to Roe and Luka have to have something to do with the prophecy," I said, "and maybe it can help us figure out a way to defeat Price or at least tell us more about what the hell is going on."

"You're right," Brad said, sitting up a bit straighter. "What do we

have to do?"

Fallon rolled her eyes. "You're both crazy."

"I agree," Jet said.

I raised my eyebrows. I never thought I'd see the day when Jet and Fallon agreed on something. "We have to try. It's the only option we have. I can't face Price, not with my hands tied behind my back."

Neither Jet nor Fallon spoke again.

Turning back to Brad, I said, "Okay. Last time we were discussing the prophecy and Iâ€|thinking we were wasting timeâ€|spoke the lines of the prophecy with you."

Brad looked at me expectantly.

"We said it _together_," I said, placing emphasis on the last word. "But it was only part of the prophecy. I think if we said the next part together it'll happen again."

Brad shrugged. "It's worth a try. Okay, so where do we start?"

"On the line about me."

He nodded.

I leaned back in my seat and counted, "One, two three." On three, I heard Brad's voice join my own.

"_But one of many forms will ascend and change the course of fate for a brother Descendant. Together, the one will lead embracing light to fight_."

Once again, I felt the world around me spin and my head begin to throb in time with the world. I wanted to rejoice with Brad that it had worked, but I couldn't find my voice. Not to mention I was slightly worried I'd vomit if I opened my mouth. My eyes closed, shutting out the swirling images before me.

When I could no longer smell the scent of clean leather, I opened my eyes. I was back in the forest, and certain this time that I had some how time travelled into Luka's body, but I looked down at my hands just to be sure. Yup, not mine.

The only problemâ€|I was alone. I turned in circles, eyes flickering and ears listening for any sign of life around me. But there was nothing. I was completely and utterly alone. Where was Brad? Where were the people who'd escaped? Where was Elota?

I couldn't just stand in the middle of the forest. Who knew how much time I had before I was snapped back into my own body? I wasn't going to learn anything unless I found someone to talk to.

Straining my ears, I listened for a soundâ€|honestly any sound at that pointâ€|and was able to hone in on the swishing of a stream. I followed the sound, making my way through the trees. About a minute later I came across a brook and, best of all, there was someone at

the brook. I stepped forward, about to announce myself, when I froze.

There was a girl standing beside the brook. Her hair long and straight—and blonde. But less than blonde really. Her hair was so blonde that it could have been white. And I recognized it. I didn't think I could ever forget the color of her hair, or what it looked like under the moonlight.

"Shira," I breathed aloud.

Her head whipped around, deep blue eyes landing on me. Aside from the longer hair, the siren looked exactly like she did last spring when she tried to take over my town—which was more than a little troubling considering I was seeing her while I thousands of years in the past. Closing the distance between us, she opened her mouth and musical notes drifted towards me.

My hands shot up to cover my ears at the sound of her voice, but it was no use. Her song subdued me and the water flowing from her hands easily seeped between my fingertips and flowed into my ear canal. As Shira's liquid swam deeper into my mind, all sound aside from her hypnotic voice was blocked out. I felt like I was floating underwater and Shira's melody was the current pulling me this way and that.

Who are you? Shira's voice echoed in my mind.

Against my will, my own voice came out clear and sure. "Marina," I told her.

How do you know me?

"We've met before," I answered automatically.

When?

"In the future."

She eyed me curiously. I didn't think she doubted my answer. She was controlling me after all. I couldn't speak anything but the truth and she knew that. Her only choices were to accept my responses as true or to conclude that I was crazy, and considering she was a siren with the ability to control minds, I was betting she wouldn't pick the crazy one.

Tell me what happened.

I was sure there would be some horrible consequences for relaying future happenings to someone from the past—like, oh god, Shira actually succeeding in taking over the town—but I couldn't do anything to stop myself. There was no Jet around to knock me unconscious and I hadn't seen Brad since I'd arrived in this time. Literally unable to keep my mouth shut, I told Shira everything that happened last spring, including the part about her currently being statue-like at the bottom of the ocean.

She started frowning about halfway through my story, but she never interrupted me.

I was silent once I'd finished. My thoughts, however, weren't. They ran laps around my paralyzed bodyâ€”berating me for being so stupid as to not run from Shira, wondering if Shira will kill me, hypothesizing what would happen to me and Luka if she did. Would Luka live? Would I live?

_I___'___m not going to kill you. Or hurt you._

Oh? Well, that was a fresh change. Who knew a villain could show mercy?

_Villain, huh? Well, I suppose I___'___ve been called worse._

Like what? Demon? Witch? All fittingâ€”

_I am no witch. _Shira spat the words in my head. _I am not some filthy spawn of my brother._

I was about to answer when Shira lifted her hands again. Something warm trickled out of my ears. I reached a hand up, fingers feeling drops of water on my ear lobesâ€”drops that, seconds later, floated through the air and were reabsorbed into Shira's fingertips. I stared at Luka's hands. I could move them again. I was in control.

Stunned, I looked back up at Shira. "You-you're letting me go?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You seem surprised, Marina."

"Well, yeah. I meant the whole villain thing," I said. My eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why did you let me go? What do you want?"

She smiledâ€”a mischievous, and yet, curious smileâ€”a combination probably only found if you were to force together Tommy and Brad's smiles. "Nothing," she said smoothly.

My fingers twitched to cover my ears again. Her speaking and her singing voices didn't sound so different.

"I'm just hoping that you'll come to a small gathering at sunset." Her smile dropped, suddenly serious. "It's a very important gathering and I'd love for you to be my honored guest."

I looked at the sky. Sunset was sooner than I expected. But I also didn't know when the present would snatch me back, and I still hadn't found Brad. And, probably most importantly, I didn't trust Shira. "I think I'm going to have to pass."

Shira frowned again. "But don't you want answers?"

Of course I did. "I don't make a habit of going to my enemies' gatherings. I don't trust you not to kill me or control meâ€”again."

"I'm not your enemy," Shira said, "Though I understand why that is hard for you to believe. Don't you want to know why you can't shift?"

"I know why I can't shift. I'm not in my own body."

"But isn't thisâ€¦Luka supposed to be able to shift as well?" she asked.

She was right. I didn't understand why I couldn't shift as Luka. According to the shapeshifter stories, she was born with the ability to shapeshift. Apparently that was a detail made up as time passed. "Yes," I said through gritted teeth.

A smile found its way back onto Shira's face. "Then come, and maybe you'll get the answers you're looking for."

I gave in, nodding. After all, wasn't that what I was here for?

38. Enemies and Allies

****A big thanks for the reviews of last chapter. I especially loved all the exclamation marks ;) Another chapter so soon! And I've already started the next one too, so I'm hoping it'll be up in about a week. Anyway, as always, I hope this chapter entertains you and that you will let me in on your thoughts by reviewing!****

Shira had graciously pointed me in the right direction of civilizationâ€”or as close to civilization as one could get thousands of years in the past. And that was only after she told me to meet her and herâ€¦acquaintancesâ€¦in the field at sunset where the demon thing attacked the last time I was transported into Luka's body. She also warned that if I didn't show up, she'd take control of all the people there and have them hunt me down. Not my enemy? Yeah right.

Step by step, I made my way through the forest, the twigs and rocks and things not bothering my feet as much as they would normally. I didn't want to think about the calluses on the bottom's of Luka's feet for her not to be able to feel the splinters on the ground. Shoes were a wonderful invention. When I got homeâ€”if I lived passed my meeting with Priceâ€”I was going to buy at least two new pairs of shoes. Some flip-flops and maybe some sneakers.

While I wandered, I contemplated my color choices. I'd always liked blue, but maybe I should go for something different. Like a neon yellow. That'd be really different.

"Marina?"

I stopped and looked to my left, finding myself staring at Eloise. No. Not Eloiseâ€”Elota. I still wasn't in my own time.

"You're not walking away which means you must be Marina," Elota said. "I wasn't sure since I didn't have a vision about this meeting."

"Yeah, it's me," I said, wondering what had happened when my soul had returned to my body. "Why? How long was I gone?"

"Only about a day," Elota said, shrugging.

I nodded. Okay, that wasn't too bad. But, man, Luka must have had a hard day. "What happened to that demon thing attacking

everyone?"

Elota's face fell. A crease formed in her forehead, lined with worry. "He's still around," she muttered bitterly. "Probably having a good laugh over our attempt to stop him."

I frowned. "Attempt to stop him? I don't think arrows and fists can do much hurt to something made of air."

Elota looked up. "Of course not. I was talking about yourâ€"I mean, Luka's parents."

My frown deepened, thoroughly confused. "What about Luka's parents?"

"We made them shapeshifters in hopes that they could defeat the demon of air," she said, as if it were obvious.

I was floored. "Woah. Wait." I held up my hands to keep her from talking. "You're telling me that Roe and Luka's parents were _made_ shapeshifters? That _you_ somehow did this?"

Elota shook her head, staring at me as if I were crazy. "Of course they were made. Shapeshifters aren't bornâ€"|" She eyed me for a moment. "â€"yet. But I didn't make them."

"Then who did?"

"A sorcerer," Elota stated as a matter of fact.

"A sorcerer?" I put a hand to my head, pacing around a single tree. Shapeshifters were made by sorcerers? "How is that possible?"

"It's not." She rolled her eyes. "Weren't you listening? Roe and Luka's parents are dead. The sorcerer's magic didn't work."

"Oh." I stopped pacing. "Then how does the entire race of shapeshifters start?"

Elota shrugged again. "I don't know." Though there was a suspicious glint in her eye when she looked up at me.

Deciding to change the subject, I brought up Shira, wondering if Elota knew anything about this gathering at sunset. "I met a siren down by the river," I told her.

She raised her eyebrows. "A siren?" she asked, "What's a siren?"

I cocked my head. "You know, affinity to water," I said but Elota still looked confused. "When she sings she can control people."

Recognition lit up on Elota's face. "You met her?" She seemed shocked.

"Yeah, it was weird," I admitted. "At first she controlled me to get all this information out of me, but then she let me go and invited me to some gathering."

"At sunset?"

"Yeah," I perked up. "Are you going too?"

Elota eyed me curiously, much as Shira had when I told her I was from the future, and turned her back to me. "Yes. And you're sure she asked you to come?"

I nodded. "She said if I didn't come she'd send people out to look for me."

She was quiet for awhile, taking up my pacing position and walking back and forth. Finally, she turned back towards me, still frowning. "Tell me, Marina, has this Elosy ever mentioned me?"

"Eloise, you mean?" I asked, shaking my head. "No, why?"

"Last we met I told you that seers are reincarnated," she started, "and right before we die we have one last vision—a vision about our next incarnation. Then, when the next incarnation is born they have memories of their past incarnation, sometimes to the point where they can even relive those memories."

"So you're saying that Eloise should remember you? What does this have to do with shapeshifters or the siren?"

"Everything," Elota breathed, pacing again. "If she doesn't remember me then that means—" She trailed off, not finishing her sentence and frustrating me even more.

Why couldn't she just think aloud? It'd save me the trouble of asking questions. Crossing my arms over my chest, I glanced up at the sky. It was almost sunset.

Elota stopped short suddenly, head whipping up to make eye contact with me. "I know what I need to do."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to share that with me?"

She smiled happily and, skipping over to me, linked arms. "You'll see," was all she said.

I groaned up to the sky as if it could save me. I could definitely see how Elota and Eloise were reincarnations of each other. They were equally annoying.

Pulling me along, Elota led me to the field where I first woke up at Luka. The field was crowded with people. But I didn't recognize any of them. Brad wasn't there and neither were any of the people who'd escaped the attack. My eyes scanned the crowd, searching for a familiar face. They stopped on a man who stood slightly taller than the rest. It was the same man who was addressing Roe and Luka's people the other day. The man Brad thought was a sorcerer and who claimed to possess magic.

"What's he doing here?" I asked Elota.

"We'll need him," she said, "He's the sorcerer who lent his power to Roe and Luka's parents."

"Him? But he didn't act like he was trying to help before—"

Elota didn't answer me. She gazed around at all the faces, a smile etching itself across her face. "Looks like everyone's here but your siren," she said, eyes flitting from person to person.

I looked around. She was right. Shira was the one who wanted me to be here but she wasn't even here herself. Where was she?

"Let us come together," the sorcerer spoke, addressing everyone in the field.

Elota moved towards him. I reached out and grabbed her arm. "Where are you going?" I asked, glancing around and feeling completely out of place.

She pulled my fingers off of her. "I have to get to my spot," she said. "Don't worry, Marina. Just stay here." Then she walked away from me, leaving me standing on the edge of the field all alone.

Something that felt strangely like fear began to creep into me. Why had I agreed to come? Why wasn't Shira here? Why had I trusted her? Why had I thought it was a good idea to try to be Luka again? More than anything, I hoped Brad was okay.

I watched as everyone in the field formed a circle at the center, with an opening—just wide enough for one person—like a window pointed directly where I was standing. Gulping, my eyes wandered around the circle, counting the number of people in the circle. There were twelve. A dozen against one. Never good odds.

"Stop quivering like a terrified mouse, Marina," Shira snapped.

I turned on my heel. Shira emerged from the trees like a goddess. Her human features melted away, skin dissolving as if her watery form were drinking it away. Her long hair whipped in the wind, what little color it held disappearing and drops of water spraying out behind her. Now made of nothing but water, the remaining rays of the sun caught against her, making it look like she was sparkling. She shined so bright she could have been made of stars.

"Let's go," she said, her voice sounding like a rolling ocean wave.

Probably against my better judgement, I followed her. She strode through the small gap, coming to a stop in the center of the circle. Turning slowly, she stared at each and every person. I wasn't sure if it was my imagination or my own fear, but it looked like each person trembled a bit under Shira's gaze. Once she'd acknowledged everyone, she turned to me and smiled, her watery lips flowing across her face.

She lifted her head and spoke to the group. "You have tried in vain to create a supernatural out of a human that would be able to defeat Seb," she said, her wave of a voice crashing to shore. "You have failed."

My eyes wandered around the circle. No one spoke. Every eye was focused on Shira's form.

She continued. "But not this time. Because this time you have me." She paused, glancing at the people gathered before her. "And this time, you have her."

I looked to see who she was referring to, stopping short when I saw that her glistening finger was pointed at me. "What?" I whispered, "Shira, I don't thinkâ€"

"Shh," she said to me. Addressing the group again, she said, "Now, I ask you to call on the power your creator gave you-whoever that may be. Find that power inside you, in your soulâ€"the very essence of who you areâ€"and bring it to the surface so that it can be used to put Seb away once and for all."

Everyone in the circle closed their eyes, their faces perfect pictures of calm as they focused on the energy inside them.

Shira leaned down toward me. "Stay here," she whispered before she straightened back up and moved to fill the gap in the circle.

I wanted to protest, but I suddenly found my voice caught in my throat. I didn't understand what was happening.

The field was eerily silent. The soft wind that had whipped out of the trees fell dead as if an invisible barrier had been put up to contain it. Any and all noise ceased. I whirled around, eyes flitting from person to person. But no one looked at me. No one opened their eyes. Not even Elota.

A soft buzzing sound flitted to my ears, almost like that of a lit lightbulb. A barely audible hum. The sun set, letting darkness fall over the field. But new lights emerged.

I watched, wide-eyed as each person began to glow with power. The glow surrounding each person was a different color. There was green and purple and orange. Gold, pink, tan and black. Turquoise, silver, and coral. The glow surrounding Elota's body was white while the sorcerer's was red. And finally, Shira's was a deep, dark blue.

Auras. I finally understood. Each person standing in the circle was a different supernatural. A different supernatural with a different power inside of them.

When Shira's voice sounded in the circle again, it was quiet, but it had the force of a tsunami behind it. "Call forth your power," she murmured, "and nowâ€|give it away."

Every person in the circle raised both their hands. It was only then that I realized their hands were glowing. Colorful light radiating from their skin. All at once, the color in their hands shot out of their fingertips and raced through the air, hitting me.

I was frozen to the spot. I couldn't move as all colors of the rainbow danced before my eyesâ€"the same swirling colors I saw every time I looked for Jet's aura. The aura of a shapeshifter.

Slowly, the colors retracted, seeping into my skin. I lifted my head to see that everyone was staring at me now, their auras still echoing their forms.

Elota stepped forward into the circle. Her gaze wasn't on meâ€”she seemed to be staring out at no point in particular. A haunting echo filled her voice when she spoke.

"_When red tints Roe, the war of light will begin. Those of the rainbow will be the first plagued. Magus will bare them and fill the dark with fear. But one of many forms will ascend and change the course of fate for a brother Descendant. Together, the one will lead embracing light to fight. Only one can join the sun at dawn._"

The field in front of me swam in my vision before I snapped back to Brad's car.

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"Wait, wait, wait," Fallon said, stopping me mid-sentence yet again. "Let me get this straight. Shapeshifters come from combining the powers of every supernatural that exists?"

"Yes," I said for what I was pretty sure was the third time. "It makes sense if you think about. Where do we get the power to change shapes? Where do you think our strength in our animal forms come from? How do you think we are able to heal when we shift?"

"She's right," Jet said, "it does make sense. Especially considering the auras."

Brad's face fell. "And while you were becoming the first shapeshifter, I was convincing all those people that they shouldn't rely on magicâ€”that they should turn away from it." He sighed. "I'm the reason hunters have existed throughout time and exist today."

"It's not your fault," I insisted. "You were right to tell them not to rely on magic. What they did after that has nothing to do with you."

"Besides," Fallon said softly, "you're the one is supposed to change the views of hunters today. And if you were able to convince a bunch of strangers to stay away from magic then I have total confidence that you can convince a group of friends and family that it isn't bad."

Brad didn't respond, but I could tell from the lines that creased his forehead he was still upset.

The four of us spent the rest of the car ride either stewing in our own thoughts or getting some much needed sleep. While the information I'd learned from Luka was interesting, I couldn't quite figure out if it was relevant at all to what was going on with Price. I could feel in my gut that Price taking shapeshifter's animal forms was related to what I just witnessed, but I didn't know how. Was he just taking the power for himself or was he somehow able to give the power out to other people? Was he helping hunters get revenge or something? It still didn't make sense.

Hours later, Jet pulled up the street to Bella's old house. It was dark out so we didn't bother trying to sneak around. We got out of the car, stretching and cracking joints back into place from sleeping

at odd angles. I wanted nothing more than to climb into bed, snuggle up against Jet, and forget everything that had happened today. My dad had led everyone from the tribe back to my house, pointing out that they weren't a threat or a prize to Price now that they were essentially human. I didn't argue with him. I was just glad that I didn't have to deal with them for at least another six hours.

Throwing open the front door, I called into the house for Skye and my mom, but they didn't answer. At first I thought no one was in the house, but then I noticed a light creeping out from under the door that led to the kitchen at the back of the house.

Jet, Brad, and Fallon followed me through the hall to the kitchen. I slowly pushed open the door and walked in, stopping short when I saw who was there.

The scene before me was familiar, and yet, not one I expected to ever see again. Bella stood beside the kitchen island, her hand outstretched. Every few seconds she flipped it 180 degrees. The recipient of Bella's power sat, sprawled on the tiled floor, a deep scowl set on her face. Her legs were made of water, thatâ€"thanks to Bellaâ€"kept forming into a goopy gel substance.

"What the hell?" Fallon asked, looking from Bella to Shira and back to Bella.

Beside me, Jet shifted into his wolf, his growls directed at Shira. I stared, tense, and yet, hesitant at the same time. Seeing Shira againâ€"in my own time and with short hairâ€"brought back all my memories of last spring. Of how Bella had basically made Shira into a giant glass sculpture and how she was supposed to be at the bottom of the ocean.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Shira. "How'd you escape?"

"Maybe if you get your little mermaid bitch here to let me go, I'll tell you," Shira said.

Yup, that was Shira alright. Clearly a thousand years had taken away her tact as well as any pleasantries she possessed. What I really wondered though was how she was immortal. Was she like Kayleigh's father?

"How about you tell us what we want to know and then maybe, if we like your answers, we'll let you go," Bella said.

"But it's not likely," I added. While Shira had shown me some good faith a thousand years ago she'd still attacked my townâ€"and that was only last year. I also hadn't told the others about my encounter with her as Luka.

Shira threw her head back and groaned. She rolled her head around her shoulders in an exasperated sort of way. "Fine," she said.

"How'd you escape?" I asked again.

Shira looked up at the ceiling out of the corner of her eye, considering the question. "Umm, not telling."

Bella glared at her and completely hardened her foot to glass.

"Hey!" Shira exclaimed indignantly.

Bella ignored her remark. "We may not know how you were able to liquefy, but I have no problem making you glass again and letting you sink to the bottom of the ocean like a boulder."

"She's right, and you're not off to a good start," I told her, "Next question, why are you here?"

Shira huffed again and rolled her eyes. She pursed her lips and mumbled, "I'm here to help."

"Help? You? Why do I find that hard to believe?" Bella exclaimed, "Maybe because you tried to brainwash the entire town?!"

"Tried? Oh, honey, I succeeded," Shira sneered back.

Jet growled, snapping his jaw in Shira's direction.

"I'll ask once more, why are you here?" I asked, though I had a sneaking suspicion that she'd answered truthfully the first time.

"And I'll answer once more," Shira said snidely, "to help you."

"But why?"

She groaned. "Because I'm not exactly a fan of this Price guy?" she said, but the tone of her voice made her answer sound more like a question.

"You know Price?"

"Why do you say that as if you're unsure?"

Fallon and I said at the same time.

She shrugged. "I don't really have anything against the guy personally, but, there's someone else he's with that I'm not exactly fond of."

Both Bella and I narrowed our eyes at her.

Shira groaned again. "Let's just say that Price is royally screwing things up."

"You do realize that being cryptic doesn't help your cause, right?"

Shira didn't say anything. She just continued to glare at me.

"What was she doing when you got here?" I asked Bella.

She glanced over at me but didn't move her hand away from Shira. "Actually, she was just sitting on the couch," Bella admitted.

"Yeah," Shira piped up, "I was waiting for you," she pointed to me, "to show up, but I got spontaneous-tail girl instead." She jerked her head in Bella's direction.

I glared at Shira. "Insulting my friend doesn't help you either."

"I'm not insulting her," she said, "I'm stating a fact."

I sighed, half groaning myself. My eyes fell on Shira's slumped form. If she was telling the truth, and she was here to help, then she could be a valuable asset against Price. But, on the other hand, if she was lying—

"Come on, Marina," Shira said, her voice temporarily losing its harshness. "You know if I wanted to take control of you I would have done so already." She smiled a bit, a soft smile that reached her blue eyes. "I once trusted you to help me. Now I'm asking you to trust me to help you."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. Did she really remember? There was only one way to find out. "Let her go, Bella."

Bella frowned, confusion etched across her face. "Wha-what?" she stuttered, "but you know what she's done."

"I do," I said calmly, "But I also think that she's telling the truth. She's not here to hurt us or anyone else."

Fallon raised her hand in the air, eyes shifting between every person in the room. "Umm, hello? Does anyone want to tell me who these people are? And why they're in the kitchen?"

Bella dropped her hand, allowing Shira to reform her legs while Jet shifted back to human form.

"Fallon," I said, starting introductions, "this is Bella. We have been staying in her former house."

Bella did a small wave at Fallon. "Hey."

"And this is Shira," Jet said, a slight glare still on his face. "She placed the whole town under mind control last spring before we stopped her and Bella was able to make her a statue."

Shira rolled her eyes. "Well, when you say it like that—"

"Like what?" Bella asked. "That's exactly how it happened."

"Okay, fine. So," Shira said, rubbing her hands together, "is there someplace I can crash? Being knocked around on the ocean floor is tiresome."

Staring at Shira, Jet wrinkled his nose and raised his eyebrows.

I sighed. "Upstairs," I told her. A second later, Shira had disappeared, leaving the five of us in the kitchen.

"So," Bella said slowly, filling the awkward silence, "How've you

been?"

Looking at her, I started to laugh. I reached out and pulled her into a hug. "I missed you."

****Bella's back! Yay! Finally, am I right?****

39. Reappearance

****Thank you very much for the reviews of last chapter. A special thanks to **_Divergent123_** and **_ObsessedwReading_** for their reviews. It is nice to know that I can count on you two to share your reactions. So, on to the next chapter! I have to be honest, there isn't much action in this one but Marina's got a lot on her plate. Anyway, you don't want to hear from me, you'd much rather hear what Marina has to say...****

* * *

><p>Three days. That was all I had before Price issued a command that started me on track to my personal hell. Well, less than three days really since it had basically taken a day for us to get back home. Initiating countdown to hell now. Two days, three hours, and six minutes. And that wasn't counting the hours needed for sleep. One couldn't take on an all powerful sorcerer without her beauty rest.<p>

And some beauty rest was exactly what we all needed. Spending twenty-four hours in the car was not conducive to keeping proper sleep schedules, nor was spending over sixteen hours on a plane as Bella had. After talking with Bella a bit, I snuck away, letting Brad catch her up on everything that had happened since January. The only information she really wanted to get out of me was that on the boysâ€"or boy, ratherâ€"in my life. When I finished telling her about Jet and listening to what was going on with her and Will (I knew it!), I was more than eager to climb in bed. I had questions, but anything else could wait until morning.

Upstairs, I slid my shoes off my feet, laying my hands down on the mattress and smoothing the blanket over it. In the dark, the blanket looked black instead of the royal blue it actually was. The fleece was as dark as the night sky outside, the moon invisible. In two days time the moon would be a sliver of a crescent, providing the world with little light.

"Not much of an interior decorator is she?"

I turned my head to see Shira leaning against the doorframe. I sighed. "She moved. Bella doesn't live here anymore."

Shira scoffed. "You think I can't figure that out? I may spend more than half my time in the water, but that doesn't mean I'm not familiar with human customs." She walked into the room, her fingers trailing along the lone dresser. "I've had years of experience observing them after all."

I leaned against the bed, preparing myselfâ€"for what, I didn't know. "What do you want, Shira?"

She cocked her head in my direction, pressing her index finger into the corner of the dresser. "I only want to know one little thing. Not that important really. It's more about what you want."

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Why did she insist on baiting me? She acted so tough, and of course, on some level she was, but having seen what she was like with me in the forest as Luka, I knew most of it was an act.

"And what do I want?"

She shook her head, her blonde hair still standing out despite the darkness. "Nuh-uh. Me first." She wandered over to the window, staring out at the water. "Do you remember how we first met?" she asked, voice low, like water disappearing down a drain.

I froze. She couldn't be talking about last spring. That was less than a year ago and surely she'd know I hadn't forgotten. No, she had to be talking about something else. While I had only relived the past a couple hours ago, in actuality the events I witnessed had taken place thousands of years ago. In Shira's mind, our first encounter would have been then, not last year.

"Yes," I whispered and she turned at my word. "You interrogated me and I told you I was from the future."

She laughed. "You weren't lying," she said. "I've been looking for you for a long time."

"Then why did you attack me?" I asked. "All those years ago, you helped to create shapeshifters. Why try to take control of the entire town?"

She tilted her head smirking. "'Cause it was fun?" she proposed.

I frowned.

She looked up at the ceiling and sighed. "I didn't know it was you. And when things started to look suspicious I had to make sure. Controlling people was the easiest way to do that, okay?"

"But you hurt people," I pushed. "You killed a woman." I could still remember every detail of how that woman had switched from panic to an eerie calm right before my eyes. My dad had told me that she'd later been hit by a truck.

Shira crinkled her eyebrows. "No, I didn't," she said. "I never hurt anyone."

"Yes, you did," I argued. "There was woman you were controlling. You made her walk in front of an oncoming truck."

Something in Shira snapped, a coldness coating her expression. "I would never do that," she hissed. "I am not some—some demon."

Even if she was telling the truth, and she didn't force that woman to commit suicide, I wasn't going to feel sorry for her yet. "You still tried to make me attack my friends."

She looked uncomfortable at my comment. "I won't deny that. But I

wanted to test you, and I wanted to see if your friends had any useful information."

"But you didn't go after me in the end. You went after Bella. Why did you want to hurt her?"

She shook her head again. "I've never wanted to hurt Bella. I only want to get to know her. To show her things she could have never imagined. After all, I am the reason she's a mermaid to begin with."

"What?"

Shira raised one eyebrow, feigning curiosity. "Of course," she said, "you didn't actually think the water in that ridiculous pool was magical? I'm the only thing magical about any body of water."

"So, let me get this straight: shapeshifters come from the magic of every type of supernatural and mermaids come from sirens' magic?"

She had opened her mouth to respond when her head whipped around to the hall and I followed her gaze.

"Shira," Jet said from the doorway. He stood tall, arms at his sides and chest out, looking like he was poised to strike at any moment. It was amazing how he could use only one word to threaten her.

"Boy toy," she addressed him, smiling. But she got the hint to leave, sauntering over to the door and sliding passed him.

He glared at her retreating figure before stepping into the room and shutting the door. "What did she want?" he asked, turning towards me.

I shook my head. "To reminisce." I shrugged, trying not to seem as floored as I was about discovering how Bella became a mermaid. I didn't feel like it was my place to tell Jet, especially since I doubted even Bella knew.

"Do you really think she's here to help us stop Price?"

I bit down on my bottom lip, realizing that Shira didn't stick around to tell me what it was that I wanted from her, and exhaled. "Yeah, but she seems a bit reluctant."

Jet frowned. "I think vindictive would be a better description."

I smiled up at him, wrapping my arms around his waist. "Are you sure that isn't you?"

He rolled his head from side to side. "Maybe" he admitted, a smile snaking across his face.

Placing a hand on either cheek, I pulled his lips down to meet mine. I was once again astounded by the feel of our kiss"there really was nothing like kissing him. Making our way over to the bed, we laid down, pulling the blanket up over us. I curled into him as he put his arm around me, holding me close.

I fell asleep to the easy rhythm of his heart beating against my back.

//*/*

"Marina."

I pulled the blanket tighter around me, snuggling further into my pillow.

"Marina, come on. You need to wake up."

I grumbled, but refused to open my eyes, reveling in the warmth that surrounded me.

Someone laughed, a deep chuckle, and my pillow shook beneath my head. That was when I remembered there were no pillows on the bed. I opened my eyes to green. My head lay against smooth green fabric while bright green eyes watched me. Somehow, in the middle of the night, I'd turned sideways on the bed and had decided to use Jet's stomach as a pillow.

"Good morning," Jet smiled, a short laugh making my head bounce.

I closed my eyes again and snuggled closer to him, righting myself. "Shh. It's too early."

Jet wrapped his arms around me and brushed my hair away from my face, his own sticking up at odd angles. He leaned closer, kissing my cheek. "Well, someone should tell the people downstairs that, because I'm pretty sure I hear your father down there."

My eyes snapped open and I threw the blanket off of me. "We better get down there."

Jet laughed. "That's what I was trying to tell you." He slid out of bed himself, grabbing me from behind in a hug. "But somebody wouldn't listen. She wanted to stay in bed all dayâ€|not that I blame her."

I leaned into him, tilting my head up for a kiss that he quickly granted me. But that was all I could afford because in that next second my dad's voice floated up the stairs. Yeah, that was definitely him. And, it probably wouldn't be a good thing for him to discover that Jet and I were sleeping together. Of course, actually sleeping together was something we'd been doing for years, but, now that we were together together again and had, wellâ€|yeahâ€|it was just better if he didn't know we shared a bed.

Opening the bedroom door, I stepped out into the hall, Jet right behind me. The voices coming from the floor below instantly became louder as if a sound barrier had disintegrated. My feet silently turned the corner to the top of the stairs. Seated on the top step, with her head curiously propped up on one hand was Shira. She was gazing down the flight of steps, listening to the people below. She turned at our movement.

"I wouldn't go down there," she warned as we approached.

I ignored her while Jet shot her a glare. Whoever was downstairsâ€|besides my dadâ€|was starting to yell. Walking passed

Shira, I moved down one step at a time.

"Yeah, go on ahead. Sounds like a party," Shira said, every word laced with sarcasm. "I'm going to stay up here where it's safe."

Fallon met us at the bottom of the stairs. She put a hand out to stop me in my tracks. "Trust me," she said, "you don't want to go in there."

Above us, Shira banged her head against the wall. "That's what I told her, but she won't listen." She held up her hands in a whatcha-gonna-do kind of way. "If she wants to be attacked that's her call."

Fallon looked up at Shira, her expression a mix of disgust and interest. Turning back to me, her face melted into the regretful expression of a kid who'd just broken his mom's favorite figurine. "She's right," Fallon said.

"Of course I am!" Shira exclaimed, but, again, I ignored her.

"What are you talking about? What's going on?"

Fallon pursed her lips. Holding up one finger, she said, "One: your dad's here." She held up another finger. "Two: Grace and Kayleigh came back" which would be all fine and dandy if they hadn't brought Connor and Annie with them. And then of course your little mermaid friend had to say hi, but someone was wet and she popped a tail on the kitchen floor in front of them. So some people are a tad surprised at the mermaid lying on the tile." She raised a third finger. "And three: apparently your dad decided to bring some friends with him" though I'm not really sure if they're friends from the way they're talking."

"Woah. Wait. There are people here we don't know?" I asked. "Doesn't anyone realize this is supposed to be a safe house? As in a secret?"

"Like I said: staying up here." Shira patted the step she sat on. "I suggest you join me."

I pressed a hand to my forehead. "I can't deal with this right now. I have to worry about Price."

Jet laid a hand gently on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. "Let's just see what's going on. We can always escape if need be. Maybe everyone's here to help."

Shira lifted her head from her hands. "Like me!"

Jet glared at her again. "You haven't done anything to help," he said derisively.

Shira rolled her head around. "Alright fine. You convinced me. I'll come down too."

Jet raised one eyebrow. "We didn't convince you to do anything. You can stay right where you are."

She stood up and hopped down a few steps. "I could, but pumpkin head there," she pointed to Fallon, "mentioned that tails are out, so I should probably do something about that." She winked at me. "Besides, you might need me to, you know, get the crowd under control."

I groaned inwardly, but didn't protest. Shouts slammed into me as I entered the kitchen and the thought of having Shira shut everyone up was suddenly very tempting.

The kitchen was the most crowded I'd ever seen it. Just as Fallon had warned, Bella was indeed sprawled out in the middle of the floor, her tail slick, causing Connor to almost slip and fall on top of her. Brad reached out and grasped Connor's arm to steady him, but he didn't seem to notice the touch. His mouth was still hanging open at the sight of Bella's orange tail. Grace didn't look quite as shocked. Her expression told me she was thinking something along the lines of "mermaids, what else could there be?" Meanwhile, Annie was staring at Bella with something kin to rapt admiration, as if she was seeing her childhood dream come to life. And Kayleigh had knelt beside Bella, the only one to offer, or be aware enough to offer, her help.

The other side of the kitchen seemed to be designated to the adults. My father stood, with one hand leaning against the island, arguing with a woman who seemed vaguely familiar. In fact, looking around at the group gathered, each person ignited a spark of recognition in my brain, but I couldn't remember where I'd seen them before.

One of the adults, a man with a bald spot on top of his head, spotted us in the doorway. "What's she doing here?" he asked, pointing at me.

I crossed my arms, annoyed. Who was he to question me? This was my place and I certainly hadn't invited him. I was about to issue a retort when Shira placed a hand on my shoulder, pulling me back.

"I believe he's referring to me," she said, a note of pride in her tone.

By now, everyone in the kitchen had turned to face me, Shira, Fallon, and Jet. More cries of outrage erupted at the sight of Shira. Damn it. Shira was starting to be more trouble than she was worth.

She leaned over, whispering in my ear. "Would you like me to take control for you?"

I shook my head. I had a feeling allowing Shira to do that would only cause more problems down the road. That was when it hit me how I knew all these people my dad had brought. I'd seen them all once before, in a bookstore, situated in a circle around Shira. They were all the supernaturals from town that she'd controlled last year. No wonder they didn't like her.

"Listen!" I called out and for once, everyone fell silent, all eyes shifting to me. "Shira's on our side now, so if any of you have a problem with that, the door's there." I gestured behind me but no one moved.

Once that was settled, Shira moved to kneel beside Bella, talking quietly with her. I briefly wondered if she was going to tell her how

she was the reason she was a mermaid.

"Okay," I said, clearing my thoughts, "now, who are all of you and what are you doing here?"

They all glanced at my dad and then one another as if expecting one of them to conjure the answer out of thin air. Finally, a woman with dyed blonde hair and small features stepped forward.

"We came to help you fight Xavier Price," she said, her voice just as small as her nose and mouth. "We know about the prophecy and that we'll be next if we don't stop him now."

I stared at the woman. Given her size and the weakness in her voice, it was hard to believe she'd have any success against someone like Price, and yet, she had been the one in the group to speak up. Not bothering to ask any of them what type of supernatural they were, I searched for their auras. I recognized the gold aura of the woman addressing me to be that of a faerie, like Lila from back in the prison. Behind the woman, the balding man had an orange aura, the man to his right was a shapeshifter, and the last two women had pink auras, similar to Kayleigh's but their color much more saturated. I guessed the two women with the pink auras to be full immortals, but I had no clue what the guy with the orange one was.

"Okay, umm great. Thanks," I said, not sure what they were supposed to do now. They looked at me as if expecting instructions, but I had no idea what to tell them.

"You called me a bitch!" Bella exclaimed indignantly, drawing everyone's attention back to her. But she didn't seem to notice. Her eyes, currently slits, held Shira's gaze.

Shira smiled and held a hand out to Bella. "Yes, but I said it with love."

Bella stared at Shira like she was crazy, and rightfully so, she certainly seemed to be leaning in that direction. My guess was that Shira had told her she was her mermaid parent, for lack of a better word.

Fallon stepped up, calmly addressing the group of adults, each of whom was slightly bewildered by the exchange occurring on the floor beside them. "Why don't all of you join me out in the yard?" Fallon asked. "You can show me your abilities so that we can best decide your most useful place in the fight against Price."

She gestured to the back door, and slowly everyone began to file out, my dad following the group. He hadn't mentioned anything to me, but I wondered where my mom and Skye were—and Nathan. All three had mysteriously disappeared. With a quick glance in my direction, Fallon shut the door behind her.

Now the only people left in the kitchen were me, Jet, Bella (still on the floor), Shira, Kayleigh, Grace, Connor, Annie, and Brad. Okay, so nine still made it pretty crowded.

Head turning all around, Connor asked, "Where's Tommy?"

Shira's head snapped up at the mention of Tommy's name, though I

couldn't fathom why.

"He's not with us," Jet said gruffly. "He went to work with Price."

"And we don't know why," Grace added, eyes flitting from person to person as if expecting someone to challenge her.

Connor looked particularly put out. "But he must have had a good reason," he said. No one said anything. Everyone knew he and Tommy were best friends, if anyone felt obligated to defend Tommy it would be Connor.

Shira shrugged as she ran her hand over Bella's tail and her legs instantly reappeared. "If he's your friend and he hasn't given up this location yet, then I say you should still trust him. Maybe he can't communicate with you, but that doesn't mean he's the enemy."

I frowned at Shira. While she made a good point, there was something that struck me as strange in her words. Something inconsistent.

"But when I saw him at school, he was clearly helping Price," Grace insisted.

"Maybe you heard him wrong," Connor said stubbornly. "He did help us all escape the concert last week to come and hide here."

That was it! Shira had said that Tommy hadn't given up our location yet. But how would she know that Tommy had been to Bella's house? Especially when she had been supposedly swaying with the currents at the bottom of the ocean at the time? Exactly how long had she been free? And why defend Tommy at all? After all, he'd been instrumental in her downfall last spring. There was clearly something she wasn't telling me.

"Marina!"

I turned around at the sound of my name, only to stumble backwards as my little sister jumped me, wrapping her arms around me. Pulling back, I stared at her. "Skye, where have you been?"

She beamed at me. "While you were off on your mission at the tribe, we went on one of our own."

Brad's father filed into the kitchen after Skye. Behind him, walked a teenage boy with shaggy brown hair. He was dressed in all black—the exact same outfit I'd worn when pretending to be a hunter—and seemed to be about Skye's age. Despite the uniform, the boy couldn't have looked more out of place in it. He wore a goofy smile on face, making him look even less like the soldier he was supposed to be.

"Marina," Skye said slowly, "this is Zach."

I swallowed hard, trying to direct my anger at Skye rather than the innocent boy standing in front of me. Though, judging by his choice in clothing, he couldn't have been that innocent. There was no doubt in my mind that this was Zachary Rubin, the boy Skye enjoyed making out with.

When I didn't say anything, Zach cleared his throat. "Umm, hi?" he said hesitantly, glancing around the room. He clearly hadn't expected to meet so many people. He looked down at his black t-shirt. "Uh, I know I look the part, but I swear I'm on your side."

Someone else, someone much taller than Zach, entered the kitchen. He slapped Zach on the back while my mother peeked around both their shoulders at everyone in the room.

"It's true. Stole the keys to break me out and everything."

I stood, mouth agape, completely stunned. The person standing beside Zach, while smiling, looked exhausted and had deep, dark circles surrounding both his eyes. "C-Cole?" I stuttered.

A hint of sadness snuck into my brother's smile. "Hey, Marina," he said. He shifted uncomfortably when he noticed Grace in the room.

But I didn't care. I ran to him, enveloping him in a hug. "You're free," I said, stepping back. "Are you okay?"

"As okay as I can be," he admitted, sneaking another glance in Grace's direction.

I knew he felt guilty about what had happened to Grace's father, but I refused to believe he'd really done it. He said he didn't remember attacking her father so that meant he hadn't actually been the one to attack him. Either the video he mentioned was fake, or they'd put some magical stunt double in his place, or he was being controlled. My gaze slid over to Shira.

It was entirely possible that she'd set Cole on Grace's father. But then that meant that she'd been working for Price while we were gone. She'd said she thought Price was screwing things up. Did that mean she supported him initially and then when she learned his plans, ditched him in favor of us? It made some sense. It could even explain how she knew Tommy had our location but hadn't given it to Price. But all of it begged the question: was Shira really on our side? Could Tommy be?

I needed to talk to Shira, but I couldn't do it now. Not with all these people around. I had to find a way to get her alone.

"So Zach can stay?" Skye asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

I looked between my sister and Zach, who had linked arms, and shrugged. "I guess," I said, "but you should check with Mom and Dad."

"Your father's here?" my mom asked, scanning the faces in the room.

"Yeah," I told her, "he's out back with a bunch of others." No sooner had the words left my lips than the rest of my family pushed open the door to the back yard and slipped outside.

I sighed. There were way more people here than I was capable of dealing with. Jet slipped his hand into mine and squeezed, sensing my anxiety. I shot him a quick smile and squeezed back.

I glanced around at the remaining faces, all of them staring back at me expectantly. I ignored the pressure building up inside me. My gaze came to a stop on Brad. First thing's first.

"Brad, I think we should finish the prophecy," I said. "We only have one line left. Perhaps it'll be the one we need to put everything together."

He nodded once in response, immediately sinking down to sit on the tile floor. I joined him. I knew most people in the room were staring at us with looks of confusion on their faces, but I didn't have time to deal with their questions. Someone else could answer them while Brad and I ventured into the past. I peeked at the watch around Brad's wrist. One day, fourteen hours, and thirty-nine minutes.

Part of me was amazed at my mathematical abilityâ€"apparently pressure and death threats did wonder for my math skillsâ€"while the other part was more concerned about what that time meant. "On three?" I asked Brad. He nodded again. "One, two, threeâ€"

"_Only one can join the sun at dawn_."

Nothing happened.

There was no lurch, no sicknessâ€"my vision remained clear. I blinked at Brad. He was frowning. Why hadn't it worked?

"Ahhh!" Annie screamed while Grace let out a string of curse words, both falling to the floor and scrambling away from the space in the corner they'd occupied.

In their place, now stood a whole group of new people. It was as if they'd just teleported straight into the kitchen. I countedâ€"one two three four five six seven eightâ€"eight new people. Standing in front of the group, stood a girl with curly dark hair.

"Right on time," Eloise said.

* * *

><p>So what do you think? Who should Marina trust?

40. Forces

It has been a very long time. NaNoWriMo occupied my November, but as for the other two months...I have no excuse. This chapter should have been up back in October. I'm truly sorry that didn't happen. But I want to thank those who reviewed the last chapter. You guys are amazing and always make me smile! :)

If anyone remembers that open character submission I held way back when I first started this story, this is the chapter where you will see the remainder of those characters come into play (Max and Mikhayla). I apologize that I was unable to make them a bigger part of the story. I was able to fit a certain mermaid in though (however briefly).

****And one last note before you can get to reading: after this there will only be five more chapters before the end of the story and the series as a whole. It's hard for me to believe that this started as some little, playful story and, after two years, has developed into this complicated monstrosity. I never would have gotten this far without you (my readers, my reviewers, etc.) and I really believe I owe this huge accomplishment to you guys. So, thanks. A longer note is sure to follow in the last chapter, but I felt the need to put something here.****

****Anyway, as always, I hope you enjoy ;) ****

*** * ***

><p>My eyes flitted from person to person. As if the house wasn't crowded enough without eight new guests appearing out of thin air. Besides Eloise, I recognized four others.<p>

Flanking Eloise on either side, stood Lila, the preteen faerie who'd accidentally knocked Brad unconscious, and Milos, the deaf genie who'd helped us escape the prison. Off of Milos' shoulder stood Kiara, the kind nymph who "communicated" with the Earth, and Kye, the disgruntled pixie who still didn't look happy to be where he was. Behind them stood three newcomers whom I didn't recognize. One was a girl with long, straight blonde hair. She gave me the strangest sense that she was inspecting the cleanliness of the kitchen. The other girl, who was staring at her feet, was shorter than the first and had brown hair and lots of freckles. Finally, the third newcomerâ€"a boyâ€"had dark, red hair and, even though he wasn't smiling, seemed happy to be here.

Milos, with his multicolored hair reminiscent of a shapeshifter's aura, shot me a quick smile before taking in the rest of my company. To my right, Brad shook his head, still trying to understand how eight people had just appeared in Bella's kitchen. And, from the looks of everyone else's faces, he wasn't the only one.

"How was your trip?" Eloise asked, stepping forward. "Nevermind, you don't need to answer that. I already know." She waved away any reply that one of us might have said and proceeded to wander around the kitchen island.

The girl with the long, blonde hair frowned over at Eloise before maneuvering her way around the rest of the people she'd come with, muttering multiple "excuse me's" as she did. Once she'd gotten to the front of the group, she eyed each of us and asked, "Which one of you is Marina?"

I raised my hand and my eyebrows at the same time. "That'd be me."

The girl stepped forward once again and held her hand out to me. "Thank you for inviting us over," she said. "My name is Emma, and although my family doesn't know I'm here, I want you to know that I'm perfectly willing to stand up for what is right."

Emma's Australian accentâ€"now easily recognizable in my ears thanks to Bellaâ€"was strong, but I wondered if perhaps her desire to be polite was stronger. Not wanting to put her off, I took her hand and shook it. "Thanks, Emma. It was nice of you to come," I said, feeling

a tad fake in my response. I decided not to point out that I hadn't, in fact, invited anyone over. Nor did I ask why they were here.

Instead, I took the moment to search her for an aura. Turquoise light flitted into my vision, dancing around her figure. She was a mermaid, just like Bella. And from Australia too. I wondered if all mermaids came from the country slash continent.

The boy with the red hair stepped forward next, a smile spreading across his face as he surveyed the group. He held up a hand and gave a juttied wave. "Hey, I'm Max!" he exclaimed, still smiling.

I had a funny feeling he was about as fluffy on the inside as a teddy bear.

Max gestured to the girl with the freckles. "And this is Mikhayla. If you've got any injuries, she's your gal. She healed the the scab on my knee like that." He snapped his fingers together, then held up his leg and pointed to his knee. "And look, there isn't even a scar! She's a genius."

Mikhayla, however, didn't seem as thrilled about healing Max's scab as he did. She shifted her feet closer together and held her hands to her stomach, trying to look even smaller than she was. She seemed more than uncomfortable about the attention she was receiving.

Just as I had done with Emma, I searched the two for auras. And found that they both had one. Clearly, Eloise had felt the need to bring reinforcementsâ€”without informing me of course.

Mikhayla's aura held a silver hue, much like Kye's. However, unlike Kye, she wasn't an arrogant ass. I was happy to discover that personality trait wasn't related to being a pixie.

To my surprise, Max's aura matched Emma's. He was a mermaidâ€”or, merman rather. Part of me wondered if Shira was responsible for their transformations as well or if there was another way one could become a mer-person. Remembering Bella's unique power over water, I considered the possibility that both Emma and Max had a power tied to the element.

I glanced over at Bella to see her gazing at Emma and Max, a curiosity in her eye. No doubt, she'd checked them for an aura and discovered the same thing I had. I wanted to learn more about our new guestsâ€”I was particularly eager to discover Milos' limits and abilitiesâ€”but something else had to take priority. I turned to look at Shira. Somehow, I had to get the truth out of her. I felt a new pair of eyes on me and looked up only to make eye contact with Eloise. She had that annoying, but also encouraging, smile on her face.

I looked away. "Bella," I said, "why don't you talk with Emma and Max about what we're up against?" Bella stood up from the floor, nodding eagerly. "And Lila?" I continued, "Fallon's outside helping a bunch of others. How about you take Milos, Kiara, Kye, and Mikhayla out there too? I'm sure Fallon would like to see all of you."

Lila rushed over and gave me a hug before leading the group outside, a huge smile on her face. I had a feeling she was just happy to get

the chance to be a leader. I also knew that Fallon would most definitely not like to see more people, but I had no choice. I had to keep them occupied somehow.

"Shira," I said, finally, "I need to talk to you€|privately."

Shira smiled her devious smile but nodded, gesturing for me to lead the way back into the hall. I glanced at her outstretched hands and decided on the spot. "Actually, Eloise, I'll need you too."

As I left the room, I could see Jet and Brad looking slightly dejected that they hadn't been included, but I could inform them of anything they needed to know later. Right now, I needed to focus on discovering what my two least reliable allies knew.

Shira led the way back upstairs, holding open a door to the right of the top landing. Entering the room, I immediately recognized it as the master suite. The king size bed in the middle of the room and the large jacuzzi in the bathroom connected to it were clues enough. I noticed a few lingering drops of water in the tub. The sight got me thinking about how Shira slept. It sounded ridiculous in my head, but could it be possible that she actually melted her skin away and slept in the tub in her water form? The image of Shira in her water form asleep on the king bed popped up in my mind. The tub, no matter how ridiculous, sounded like the better option.

Once Eloise had skipped in behind me, Shira shut the door. "Okay, oh chosen one," Shira mocked. "What juicy gossip do you wish to relay to me? I'll divulge a few of my own right now if you want. The new blonde, Emma was it? She's totally a control-freak. Maxie down there is dumber than jell-o. And not the good flavor. Probably the disgusting orange one like his hair. The rainbow haired guy thinks he's above you€|he didn't listen to a word you said. That's all I got for you right now. Can't quite get a read on the mousy girl yet, but don't worry I'm sure I will."

I stared at her before squeezing my eyes shut and reopening them. The more time I spent with Shira the more I questioned her mental stability. If she was even stable at all. It was quite possible she had cracked long ago.

I glanced at Eloise for help, but, per usual, she was preoccupied, tracing a finger over the surface of a vanity mirror like she was doing a color-by-numbers.

"First of all," I said, addressing Shira, "Milos doesn't think he's above me. He's deaf so he couldn't hear what I said. And second of all, I didn't ask you up here to talk gossip."

"Oh." Shira shrugged, a pout on the edge of her lips. "Well then, what do you want?"

"I want to know how you got free."

Shira straightened at that. But only for a second. The next second she was back to slouching against the king bed. She shrugged. "Erosion."

"What?"

She rolled her eyes but didn't meet my gaze. "You know, the process of wearing away stone through the movement of water?"

I scowled. "I know what erosion is." Even though she was millennia older than me, I liked to think I knew more about erosion than she did. I'd done weeks of research on it for a 25 point class project last year. "What I meant was what does it have to do with you escaping?"

"Well, it's not like the water in the ocean doesn't move," she huffed. "I may have lost a layer of my skin, in the process, but I'd say it was worth it to be free again."

My eyes squinted in her direction. "I don't believe you."

She opened her mouth to protest, but I kept talking.

"Even if the water at the bottom of the ocean moved enough to erode you, there's no way that it could be done in less than a year's time." I crossed my arms over my chest. "So tell me the truth. How did you escape?"

Shira closed her eyes and sighed. When she opened them again she stared at the ceiling. "Fine." She pushed herself away from the bed, crossing the room. "Someone got me out."

"Who?"

It was only then that she made eye contact with me. "One of the people who put me there in the first place," she said, "your friend, Tommy."

"What?"

Shira rolled her eyes again. "Gawd, are you deaf too? I said, your friend."

I shook my head and held up my hand to stop her. "No, no. I heard what you said. I'm just surprised. Why would Tommy set you free?"

She batted her eyelashes at me. "Maybe he thinks I'm pretty," she cooed.

I glared at her.

She dropped her smile. "Jeez, you're such a buzzkill today." Rolling her head around her neck once, she continued, "He set me free with two conditions. One: that I find you and help you against Price. And two: that I give him some of my water—which, may I point out, is an extremely intrusive request, seeing as my body is water. He was basically asking for my hand in marriage—without the marriage part."

"And you listened to him? You gave him your hand?" I frowned, unable to think of a better way to phrase these situation.

"Yes," she said begrudgingly. "And while I considered just taking off without helping you, Tommy informed me that you're the one from the prophecy and then I knew I couldn't just leave you."

"Why not? We were never exactly friends before."

Shira pulled at her hair. "Do you really need everything spelled out for you?" She waved a hand at me. "Nevermind, don't answer that. Fine, we weren't friends, but we'd helped each other out all those years ago and, call me nostalgic, but I liked working with you more than working against you. Besides, I'd made Tommy a deal and Iâ€|rarelyâ€|go back on my word."

"But what did Tommy want with your hand or water or whatever?"

She shrugged. "Not sure. He told me he needed it to prove his loyalty."

My heart sank. To Price. He needed to prove his loyalty to Price. I hadn't wanted to believe it, but here was proof that Tommy had turned against us.

"But he also mentioned something about possibly needing it to inoculate people."

"Inoculate? As in protect against disease?" I asked, not exactly following what Shira was saying.

She shifted her lips from one side of her mouth and then to the other. "Sort of."

I raised my eyebrows. "Explain."

Shira's lips stuck to one side. "There's not much to explain really," she said. "If you're controlled by one thing then you can't be controlled by another. You become immune. Simple. Easy. Happy?"

I paced across the room, stopping when I reached the closed door. "Wait, so that's why you haven't tried to take control of me this whole time? Because I'm immune to you now?"

"No, that's not what I said." Shira rolled her eyes again. "I said you can't be controlled by another. Only I can control you if I want. It's like I have a claim over you."

I frowned at that. I didn't like the idea of Shira owning any part of me. "By another you mean other sirens, right?"

She didn't answer. But her uncomfortable expression was all the answer I needed. "Does Price have a siren on his side?" I wondered aloud. "That would explain why Tommy would want to use your water to inoculate people and why he'd ask you to help me. You can't fight mind control without mind control, right?"

Shira sighed. "Price doesn't have aâ€|siren," she wrinkled her nose at the word, "working for him."

"How do you know that?"

From the corner, her finger still creating smudges on the vanity, Eloise spoke up for the first time. "She's right."

I turned to glare at Eloise. She wasn't helping. Although, if I was

being honest with myself, I shouldn't have been surprised by this. Eloise never helped. "You'll get your turn."

"I know," she responded happily, irritating me further.

Shira drew my attention back to her. "I know there are no sirens working for Price because A, sirens are extremely rare supernatural beings—even more so now than they were back when you and I first met—and B, all the sirens I know would never work for someone. They would all have their own agendas. We're egotistical like that." She smirked like she was complimenting herself.

I decided not to quip back that being self-centered wasn't a good trait to possess. "So then what's Tommy doing?" I asked her.

Shira shrugged. "Hell if I know. I swear that boy's got a bigger brain than Einstein. And trust me, that man's brain complicated, I almost couldn't gain control over him. So who knows what's racing through it?"

I ignored the part about Shira knowing Einstein. That was a little weird, even for me.

But her she did have a point about Tommy. I didn't want to admit it but she was right. Tommy was probably smarter than all of us combined. I always joked that his goal in life was to become a human library. The only way I could ever get access to that library was if I asked him. And that wasn't going to happen now. Not with him so close to Price. But, I now knew that it was possible he wasn't in fact buddying up with my enemy and instead he'd been working as a spy. It would be nice if he'd been on our side the entire time.

On top of that, if Tommy had succeeded in "inoculating" people then it might be possible to have Shira take control of the hunters and sorcerers working for Price and turn them against him. But I'd rather not have to do that. Allowing Shira to use her mind control on that many people again just screamed bad idea.

After trying to get something, anything, out of Eloise—who only said that she couldn't tell me the future (useless!)—I ventured back downstairs to my friends and new guests. The people who'd been outside with Fallon had drifted back in and voices bounced off the walls in the tight space of the kitchen. All these people had come to help—to fight—and they expected me to lead them. But I didn't feel like a leader. Wasn't a leader supposed to be powerful? I had no clue how I would defeat Price. Especially if he uses that spell to take away my animal forms. To take away all the shapeshifters' animal forms.

That's when it hit me.

We couldn't rely on our supernatural abilities to win. Not if Price could take them away or render them useless. We had to find a way to be strong on our own. I searched the room for two faces in particular. It was a good thing I had two rocks for friends.

"Fallon, Brad," I called over the many heads, but my voice got lost in the chatter. Glancing around, I realized that not only was I not going to be heard but, being on the shorter side of the ruler, I

wasn't going to be seen either. I pushed my way over to the table and chairs set up in the breakfast nook.

Jet appeared at my side as I climbed on top of a chair. He didn't ask what I was doing—he probably already guessed anyway—instead he simply held out a hand to help me. I took it, using him for balance, as I climbed atop the wooden table.

"Everyone, listen up!" I shouted and almost immediately a hush fell over the room. "Brad, Fallon, I need you two up here with me." The two pushed their way through the crowd, Fallon not even bothering to apologize to those she practically shoved out of the way to get to me.

"We have less than two days until Price attacks," I told them. "For those of you who are shapeshifters, you know Price can take away your animal forms. For those of you who aren't, we can't expect Price not to have something up his sleeve to stop you too. We need to be ready for anything and that means training. I don't expect us to be perfect or even anything close to an army, but I do expect us to put up a fight. Fallon is extremely skilled in hand-to-hand combat and will be teaching you all the basics. Brad is a talented marksman and will be teaching you how to shoot. For the rest of today and tomorrow everyone will be training with them."

I waited for people to protest, to speak out against my plans, but no one did. Instead, Fallon stood up on a chair in front of me.

"You heard her," she barked, already taking on a commanding tone, "everyone outside! Training starts now."

As people filed out into the sun, I bent down, sliding off of the table, intent on joining them outside. But as my feet hit the tiled floor, Jet grabbed my arm. I watched as he made eye contact with Skye, nodding once, before she slipped out.

"Just a sec," he said, to me watching everyone leave the kitchen until we were the only two left inside.

"What's up?" I asked, looking back to where Skye was now being ushered into a jog around the yard.

"I was talking to Skye," he said.

I held back a smirk. "I could tell. You two hardly ever talk."

He frowned. "Sure we do."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Fine, maybe we didn't," he admitted, "but we do now."

"Oh?"

He let out an exasperated breath and took both my hands in his. "Marina, will you let me talk?"

I opened my mouth to tell him yes, but quickly shut it again, choosing to nod instead.

"Thank you. Anyway, Skye and I were talking and we realized, with Cole back, the ultimatum Price gave you no longer holds." He reached up and pulled a hand through his black hair. "Price doesn't have the collateral he was using against you anymore. So you don't have to meet him tomorrow night. Sure, we'll have to meet him eventually, but we have time now. We have more time to train, to plan, to make sure we're the ones calling the shots, so that when we do finally fight Price we know we will win."

He was right of course. But I also knew that if I didn't go to Price he'd come to me. While I wasn't entirely sure if he knew where we were hiding, I did know that it wouldn't take him long to find us once he started searching.

Putting off the battle felt like running. And I didn't want to run from Price anymore.

I tried not to grimace. "Thanks for telling me," I said and turned to join the others outside.

Jet reached for my arm again. "'Thanks for telling me?'" he repeated, his look incredulous. "That's it?" His green eyes narrowed in on me. "Please tell you're not still planning on meeting him tomorrow."

I bit down on my bottom lip, contemplating what I could possibly say to ease his anxiety. Then I realized that I couldn't.

"I need to finish this," I said as calmly as I could, though there was a hitch in my voice that I wondered if Jet caught.

His arm flew out, gesturing to the lines of people in the backyard, some already out of breath. "We just started training. We're no where near ready and we won't be ready tomorrow."

"I'm ready."

His features softened. "No, you're not," he said, bringing his voice down to a whisper. "You think you are, but I know you, Marina. You're terrified."

Again, he was right. Sometimes I hated how well he knew me. But he didn't know how determined I was. How I wasn't going to let Price get the best of me, no matter what. I'd fought against mind control and hunters in the past. I'd convinced Brad to switch his allegiance even after he blamed shapeshifters for his older brother's death. I was confident that I could convince Price to see the error of his ways.

And, even if I couldn't, if I turned myself over, Price would never need to go after another shapeshifter. As long as he had me he'd have any animal form he could want.

"Jet, I can't let this go on any longer. Nobody has to fight or die if I give myself over."

"You can't do that," he insisted, his hand reaching up to cup my cheek. "I can't lose you. I won't. We're all here to fight, and we can win. We just need a little time. So, please Marina, promise me you'll wait."

"Iâ€" "

The front door whined as someone on the other side slowly pushed it open.

I shot Jet a frantic glance. No one had left the house. No one should be coming through the front door. Both of our bodies tensed in expectation of an attack.

"Hello?" a woman's voice called into the front hall.

In the next second, a head to accompany that voice poked it's way through the gape. The woman looked to be in her mid to late forties and had tiny wrinkles in the corners of her eyes, showing her age. Her hair was short and jagged, the part on the top of her head held a few graying roots, but otherwise her strands were black. Jet-black.

And her eyesâ€|her eyes were bright green.

//*/*

Training continued early the next morning. And by early, I mean before sunrise. I couldn't decide who was stricter: Fallon or Ryan. Ryan, my former shifting coach from the tribe had immediately been recruited by Fallon to whip everyone into shape after he literally pushed people across the finish line of a run. Fallon barked orders at everyone, while Ryan stood over them, a shadowy presence meant only to intimidate.

Brad was Fallon's opposite in every way. He was a gentle instructor. He was helpful and encouraging when he needed to be, all the while enforcing the rules of how to properly handle a firearm. Nathan piped up here and there, but it was mainly Brad doing all the instructing in regards to shooting.

Mostly, I trained with everyone else. I learned to use my opponent's weight against them and even managed to hit the center of my target with a pistol.

Though I hoped I would never have to shoot anyone. My memories of being shot myself were still fresh in my mind. And I didn't wish that on anyone.

I got Skye to teach me how to fly. I expected her to be harsh and yell at me, but with Zach working off on the side, I think she was reminded of how I'd allowed him to stay. Learning to fly turned out to be easier than I thought it would. With a few simple instructions, I found my niche and was finally able to soar through the sky without plummeting to the ground.

Fallon trained with me too, bringing back her game of yelling out an animal and me turning into one that can beat said animal. It was getting to the point where there wasn't an animal I couldn't beat. That made me feel good, until I remembered I wouldn't be fighting an animal but a sorcerer.

Even though I expected the house to be crowded with the amount of people in and out of it, I didn't expect to be unable to find people. Bella went missing after breakfast, only to be found in the bathroom

with Emma and Max swapping water powers. And Shira disappeared during lunch, causing me to question her loyalties again until I discovered her in the basement helping Lila control the amount of faerie dust she created.

But, believe it or not, neither Bella nor Shira worried me most.

I hadn't seen Jet since the day before when he told me I wasn't ready to fight Price. He'd been around, but we hadn't talked. And it had nothing to do with us. It had everything to do with the woman who interrupted our conversation.

I knew who she was the moment she walked in the door. Her looks were enough of an indicator.

Later that night, Jet introduced me to his mother. Just because I knew who she was as soon as I saw her, didn't mean the shock was any less jolting. We knew from Nathan that Deirdre was still alive somewhere—but no one expected her to show up at Bella's house the night before our battle with Price. No one except for Eloise that is. She greeted Deirdre the same way I would have greeted Bella. Like a friend.

Fallon was the one who dug her nails into the skin around my wrist to keep me from walking up to Eloise and slapping her.

Deirdre was very nice. She even gave me a hug when Jet introduced me as his girlfriend. I appreciated that. But what I didn't appreciate was that I hadn't been able to talk to Jet since.

He hadn't even come to sleep with me last night. I went to bed and closed the door, waiting for him, but it never opened again.

I knew that Jet had never met his mother before, nevermind seen her person. And I knew he wanted time to talk with her—to get to know her—to have her get to know him. But I couldn't help feeling a little jealous of Deirdre. I wasn't used to sharing Jet like this. And although it had only been a few days, I'd grown accustomed to sleeping beside Jet—to feeling his warmth and listening to his steady breathing. Last night, I was the coldest I'd been since we began staying at Bella's. And I knew the mattress had nothing to do with the lack of heat in the house.

At eight Fallon, Brad, and Ryan called it quits for dinner. I sat with Shira in silence. Most of the house was silent. Anyone who dared talk didn't bring their voice over a whisper.

It was only a couple hours until I was supposed to meet Price. Though I could tell the training paid off, Jet had been right. We were nowhere near ready to fight Price and whoever came with him. But a few more days of training could change that. And then they'd be ready to stop Price—if he didn't keep his word.

I couldn't ask them to come with me tonight. While I was touched that they all wanted to help, I couldn't ask them to fight beside me. Sacrifice shouldn't be something you ask of another. It should be a choice only that person can make. And I don't want them to have to make that choice. Not now. Hopefully, not ever.

That was why I had decided to meet Price alone.

41. Striking Back

****I want to thank _ObsessedwReading_ for reviewing the last chapter and everyone else for reading it :)****

****Not much to say except...let's do this!****

*** * ***

><p>As everyone talked about getting some rest, I snuck away upstairs to Bella's room. Once inside, I shut the door behind me, thinking how the turquoise walls had become a welcomed comfort over the past few days. Though I wished I could be looking at the walls of my own bedroom. I wished I could be in my own house.<p>

But I knew if I was then I wouldn't be able to leave. As much as a home is a safe place it can also be a prison, holding you back from what you need to do or who you need to be.

Bella's walls, while they made me smile, wouldn't hold me back when I had to leave later.

I reached for the navy blue blanket, pulling it off the bare mattress and clutching it to my chest. I took a whiff of the scents hidden in the fabric. Most of them I could only attribute to the blanket being worn, but underneath the surface, I could just barely make out a mix of earth and sea. Me and Jet. A few more nights beneath it and Jet and I would be the only scents in the blanket.

Behind me, the handle on the door clicked open. I placed the blanket back on the bed before turning.

Jet had a soft smile on his face, as if someone was gently trying to lift one of his cheeks, while a single crease of worry traipsed across his forehead.

"Hey," he said, stepping into the room.

I leaned back, allowing the bed to support my weight. "Hey yourself."

Another crease appeared in his forehead at the same time as his smile disappeared.

He closed the distance between us and in the next second his lips were on mine. It was the best and worst kiss I'd ever received from him, because not only could I feel his passion and love for me like never before but there was also a sort of finality to it.

He pulled away, staring down at me.

"What was that for?" I asked.

He took both my hands in his and brought them up between us. "I just don't want to lose you."

"You aren't going to lose me," I told him.

"You say that, butâ€|"

"But what?"

"The prophecy," he said, squeezing my hands, "we've talked about what it meansâ€"what it predictsâ€"so many times. I think we all have it memorized. And we know it's been pointing us to Price, to the battle to come. But, what if it's also telling us how the battle ends?"

"What do you mean?"

"The last line. It says _only one can join the sun at dawn_. What if it means that, when it's all over, one of you will be left standing while the otherâ€|will be dead?" His green eyes found mine as the last word left his lips.

I could see the fear in them. I wanted to tell him that he was being ridiculousâ€"that I would be okayâ€"but I knew I couldn't lie to him. He'd just catch me.

"I know," I whispered.

"You know?" he repeated.

I nodded. "I've suspected that death's been on the table for awhile now." I forced a smile on my face as I looked up at him, but my voice betrayed my emotions. "You can't change the course of fate without being a martyr, now can you?"

"Marinaâ€|"

"It's just," my voice broke, my words barely clawing their way out. Still, they were strong enough to cut him off, "suspecting it and actually facing it are two completely different things. Iâ€"I don't know if I can do itâ€|but I do know that I have to."

"You don't have to," he insisted. "You could run away. I wish you would. I wish I could just kidnap you and drive as far away from California as possible. I'd drive to the east coastâ€"to New York City, hide you there. I wish you'd just get in the car and drive to New York City, even if you went without me. But if you did then you wouldn't be you. And I know you. You're too morally stubborn to run away from this."

I choked out a laugh.

"And I know you can beat him. Because I promise you won't be alone. I'll be right there with you. He won't be able to get to you without first going through me. I refuse to let him."

I reached for him and pulled him close into a hug. I didn't say it, but he was probably just as stubborn as I was.

"You can't always protect me, you know," I whispered in his ear, not letting go. I couldn't let him see my face. He'd know that I wasn't going to let him protect me. I refused to let him die in my place. He'd already gotten hurt because of me once before and I wasn't going to let that happen again. No matter what.

He held me tighter. "I can try."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

Letting his warmth fill me, I said, "How about, after we do win, we take a trip to New York City? Just you and me?"

He smiled against my head. "Sounds like a deal."

We were silent then, just standing there, holding each other. It was just what I needed.

I felt him bury his face in my hair. "You're not going to die, Marina."

I wanted nothing more than for him to be right—to be able to believe him. Except for maybe to have another moment like this with him tomorrow night.

//*/*

I never fell asleep. I wanted to. Rest was something that I would have welcomed. It certainly would have beaten all the worry and fear my brain racked up as I laid awake waiting for time to tick by.

Jet slept.

More than once he rolled over and put his arm around me, pulling me against him. It was during those moments that my heart almost convinced me to stay.

But, by the time 11:45 rolled around, I was ready to go. I'd spent the last half hour talking myself up to it. I was ready to confront Price.

I carefully slid off the bed, leaving Jet lying soundlessly with his head on the mattress. I would see him again. This wouldn't be the last time.

After getting my shoes on, I slipped out into the hall and down the stairs. I was only slightly surprised that I didn't wake anyone. But this was something I had to do by myself, and it seemed the house knew that. No step on any floorboard creaked or squealed under my weight and, even in the darkness, my body didn't run into anything.

Once outside, I took a deep breath of night air in and started walking. I didn't have my car and I didn't feel the need to steal anyone else's. I could have shifted, but I wanted to be as close to myself as possible, and that included my form. Besides, walking was nice. And I didn't have too far to go.

The air was crisp, creating a chill in my lungs that pushed me forward. The moon overhead provided some light but, being a waning gibbous, the trees I entered blocked most of it from view. That didn't matter though. I knew where I was. I had walked these woods hundreds of times before. Many of those times alone. I could almost believe that this walk was no different than the previous ones of

exploration.

I remembered when I first stumbled across my secluded beach while exploring years ago. It had been before I learned about other supernaturals. Before I met Bella. Before I knew Jet was a shapeshifter.

It was about a month after I learned I could shift into a dolphin. My dad hadn't let me near any water since I shifted in the ocean at that public beach. I didn't notice it at the time, but he'd spent much of that month whispering with my mom behind closed doors. Now, of course, I knew that whispering had been about me and my possible connection to the prophecy.

My dad had instructed Cole to take Skye and I out for a hike, but to stay close. I didn't listen. When Cole wasn't looking, I wandered off. And, because I'd never been out on my own before, I got lost. But I got lost in a good way because I found my hidden beach. Without a care in the world, I went swimming and practiced shifting into a dolphin before finding my way home. I ended up not only getting in trouble myself but also getting Cole in trouble since he was supposed to be watching me. Cole refused to play with me for a week after that. But I never regretted going off on my own. Not only had I gained control in my dolphin form, but I'd found a special place I could go that only I knew about.

Since then, the strip of sand became my hideaway—a place I could go to feel safe. I'd only shared its location with a handful of people, all of whom I knew I could trust. But the beach's location wasn't a secret anymore. That chapter of my life had closed. Still, I hoped the familiar water and sand would provide a small comfort to me when I confronted Price.

I had reached the line of trees surrounding the beach. Scuffles and whispers reached out to me from where I stood, still hidden from view. Price was only yards away, waiting for me in the sand with all of his followers.

I could see them, the moon illuminating their figures. There were a lot more people with him than I expected, but that didn't matter. I'd come alone to talk to Price. I didn't care who listened in on our conversation as long as I got the chance to speak.

With no one there to hold me back, I stepped out of the shadows of the trees and into the moonlight. The whispers fell still as I walked towards the group with Price at its head. It was much larger than I anticipated. Not only did Price have a number of hunters with him, but there were also many people from town I recognized and a few of my classmates, who I could only assume he'd recruited after his display at the concert. He had at least sixty people with him, all armed and ready to fight. I had no idea my beach could hold so many people.

Near the back of the group I spotted Geoff, Rebekka, Henry and Tanner as well as the tribe's chief, Sebastian, and his wife, Yvette. All of them were tied up, rope wrapped tight around their wrists. It was probably too much to hope that Price hadn't stolen their animal forms yet.

Xavier Price stood in front of his troops, looking exactly like the

commander he was. And Tommy stood off to his right, looking very much like Price's lieutenant. I tried not to stare at Tommy. I wanted to pretend he wasn't there.

"Marina," Price smiled at me, "it's nice to see you again."

"I wish I could say the same. But I can't and I won't," I told him, surprising even myself by the amount of conviction in my voice. "You have to know that I'm not happy about any of this."

His smile faded a bit. "Yes, well, I'm afraid it was unavoidable."

"If that's what you think. Let's just get to it then." I tried to keep my expression even as I stepped closer. "I will surrender to you if you promise to leave any shapeshifters and other supernaturals alone."

"That's not a promise I can make."

"Why not?" I demanded. "With me you'll have every shapeshifter form you could possibly want. Why would you want anything else?"

"I will need as much power as I can get," Price said.

"What for?" I asked. "You said 'need.' For what reason could you possibly need this amount of power?"

"In order to defeat an evil far worse than you can possibly imagine," he said calmly.

"More evil than you? More evil than what you've done?" I narrowed my eyes at him. "I find that hard to believe."

"Marina."

Against my will, my gaze whipped to the person standing off of Price's right shoulder.

"Listen to him," Tommy told me.

I glared back at him. His words were all the confirmation I needed to know whose side he was on. And it wasn't mine.

"Shut up," I snapped, his betrayal hitting me all at once. It was worse than anything Price might throw at me. My eyes narrowed into slits. "You don't get to tell me what to do. I won't listen to you or your advice anymore. You were supposed to be my friend, and you betrayed me." I clenched and unclenched my fists, wishing I could squeeze something other than the salty air. "Even after I got you out of that prison where they were torturing you—torturing you! Do you remember that? I saved you and you left me! Even after that you still left me to follow him?" I gestured incredulously to Price.

Tommy hung his head. "I'm sorry, Marina," he said softly, "but I had to finish what I started."

"What you started?" I repeated. "Are you saying you were never my friend? That you planned to betray me from the start?"

His eyes widened in surprise. "What? No! That's not what I meant."

I watched him scramble to find the words that might pacify me. What he didn't know was that there was nothing he could say that would redeem him in my eyes.

"Remember how I told you I never passed my final test to become a full sorcerer?" he asked. "How I failed my master?"

I could feel Price growing impatient and, while part of me was too, a bigger part wanted to prolong the oncoming battle as long as possible. "What does that have to do with any of this?"

Price stepped in front of Tommy, blocking him from my view. "Allow me to fill in the blanks for you, Miss Keller," he said pleasantly, sounding almost exactly as he had that day I'd gotten in trouble and was sent to see him in the principal's office. "I am Thomas' sorcerer master, Master Preu. Preu is Catalan for price. Understand, now?"

Yes. Yes I did understand now. But I didn't like how he'd belittled me and I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of a compliant answer.

Ignoring Price, I stared at Tommy. "I thought you got over that?" I said, wincing slightly at my choice of words. Failing to succeed in a talent he was born with couldn't have been easy for Tommy. It certainly wouldn't have been something he could simply "get over." "I thought you were done with your master?"

Price laughed. "He can't be done with his master until he becomes a master himself. Until he creates a spell."

I glared at him. "But Tommy doesn't want that anymore," I told him. "Not after you tried to get him to control other supernaturals!"

"I think the fact that he is standing next to me, and not you," Price said pointedly, "is proof enough of what he wants."

I didn't answer. What was I supposed to say? As far as I could see, Price was right. Tommy had discarded his friends in favor of power. Much like his master.

Price raised a hand towards me. He wanted my animal forms now. I could see it in his eyes—the determination, the hunger in them. Still, I stood my ground, preparing myself for a fight I couldn't win. But that didn't mean I wasn't going to put up one hell of a fight.

I waited for Price to make the first move, watching as he opened his mouth.

"Wait!"

Tommy stepped forward, grabbing Price's arm. "She's still my friend," he told his master. "Let me try to fix this."

Price lowered his hand, eyes flitting between his pupil and me. Finally, he nodded.

Tommy turned and took a few steps to close the distance between us.

"That's close enough," I bit out, and he stumbled to a stop a couple yards away.

"Look, Marina," he said, his gaze falling sheepishly to his sneakers. "I know you must hate me for siding with Price, but you have to understand, I need to set things right. Because I'm the one to blame in the first place."

"Blame? Blame for what?"

"For what happened to that woman you almost hit last year," he said softly so only I could hear him. "For what your brother did to Grace's father. For countless other deaths."

I stared at him, my eyes wide. My tongue flicked out and licked the salt off my bottom lip before pulling it in. "I bit down on it."

How could Tommy be responsible for that woman? Shira had been controlling her. Hadn't she? And Cole. I knew Cole couldn't have killed Grace's father out of his own free will. But to think that Tommy could be the one who forced him to do it? The person who'd been my friend the longest out of everyone? It wasn't possible.

"You're not making any sense," I whispered.

Tommy sighed. "I told you I tried to do what Master Preu asked of me. I tried to create a spell that would allow the sorcerer to control another supernatural. What I didn't tell you is that I nearly succeeded." He twisted his hands together in front of him. "For a year, I tried to create the spell using just words and motions, but nothing worked. Finally, I had to admit that I wasn't strong enough to do such a spell on my own. I needed something to supplement my power and I knew of one supernatural that could already control humans and supernaturals."

I immediately knew the supernatural he was referring to, but I chose not to interrupt him.

"So I went looking for a siren. I even went undercover amongst hunters in search of one. Three months later, I thought I found one in Hawaii. A couple locals there told me stories about a powerful monster with the ability to make people do horrible things. They said the monster had been trapped in a volcano. I went to the volcano they talked about and broke a hole in it. Air came rushing out at me, blinding and deafening me for a few seconds. When I was finally able to see again, there was nothing there. There was no siren trapped in the volcano."

"It was then that I knew I'd failed and Master Preu dropped me as his student. I didn't realize what I'd actually done until after everything happened with Shira last year. "until you came to me asking about the prophecy." He was unable to meet my gaze then, resigning to hanging his head. "I'm the one who initiated the red tints. I'm the part of the prophecy. I jumpstarted this whole thing. My actions are the reason why Price needs all this power. We're trying to fix my mistakes. Because while I let Shira out on purpose, she

wasn't the only one I let out. I didn't know it then, but there was something in that volcano that day. And that something made that woman step in front of a truck and made Cole attack Principal Wang and so much more."

"There's another siren?"

"Not exactly."

"Then what?"

He looked up at me again. Despite the eye contact, his whole posture screamed regret. "An elemental."

"What'sâ€?" I started to ask but was interrupted when Shira walked out of the water.

She was smiling in an overly cocky way as the waves bowed at her feet. "It's so nice when someone knows what really I am."

Somewhere in the back of the crowd, some chuckled. But no one paid the person any attention. All eyes were on Shira.

Shira turned her smile away from Tommy. "While you thought I was a siren," she said to me, "you were wrong. I am an elemental. A corporeal water goddess. I created every supernatural with any connection to the water not to mention entire species. I am an original source of magic."

My mouth had to be hanging open. There was no way it wasn't.

Shira winked at me before facing Price. "And I'm willing to step aside to let you take the magic you need from this shapeshifter because I understand the danger we face."

Price laughed out loud. "You need to be more careful when choosing your friends, Marina," he said. "That's two now that have betrayed you."

"It doesn't matter," I said, knowing Shira was up to somethingâ€"something that didn't bode well for Price. "I can still fight you."

He laughed even harder. "Since you came alone, I think you're greatly outnumbered."

I frowned, tilting my head from side to side and making of show of considering his words. "Outnumbered?" I repeated, "Maybeâ€|but what makes you think I came alone?"

All around, the faces of my friends and allies emerged. I felt Jet walk up to stand beside me. He took my hand, intertwining his fingers in mine, and I smiled.

42. In the Middle

**Soooooooo it's been awhile. A really, really long while. And it's totally my fault. This chapter kicked my butt. I don't know how many times I've rewritten it and I'm still not satisfied. But maybe you

guys can help me with that?*

Anyway, thank you to anyone who reviewed the last chapter. I hope you'll take the time to review this one.

The tension in the air increased tenfold as my own forces stepped out from behind the trees or rose out of the water. All around me, bullets clicked into place and I could literally hear the hum of power emanating from all the supernaturals.

A fight was going to break out soon. Very soon. And a large part of me didn't want to stop it. Because, while Price might have been right that we were outnumbered, he still hadn't given me a good enough reason to trust him. And I wasn't about to just hand over my power without one. Nor was I going to let him take anyone else's.

"You can fight us if you want!" I shouted to Price and everyone standing with him. Had Jet not been grasping my hand, I knew it would have been shaking. But he was, and I drew strength from him. "But we won't go down easy!"

"Marina! Stop! Just listen. I'm not the bad guy here," Price said. "I'm only trying to fix things that were already broken."

So he and Tommy kept telling me. That didn't mean I believed them. And yet, there was the slight chance that they were right. But there was also the way he'd attacked the tribe. He hurt people there—besides taking their animal forms. The image of the dead elder laying on the ground, broken glass surrounding his body, sprung to mind.

He killed people there.

He wanted me to understand how he could murder innocent people—how he could destroy the lives and souls of countless supernaturals. I could never understand that. No matter what.

Price frowned as he pushed his shoulders back. When he spoke again his voice held a kind of harsh desperation behind it. "While everyone else chose to remain ignorant to the signs around them, I was the one who stepped up to the fight! You were nowhere to be found. He was awake and you were hiding away, living a normal life. I did what you refused to do!" he shouted. "I was the one who deciphered the true meaning of the prophecy! I was the one who put my feelings aside to do what had to be done! To get to this point! To reach this level of power!"

My eyes flitted to Shira's feet where a puddle of water had formed and had begun to slowly creep towards Price. I did my best to focus on what Price was saying.

He raised a hand and pointed a finger at me. "Because you were too weak to do it yourself! And if you'll just give me your power, Marina, then I can defeat him once and for all! And this will be over!"

"What are you talking about?" I asked. He still wasn't making any sense. "Defeat who?"

Even if he was referring to this thing—this elemental—Tommy had

let loose, he didn't seem to know anymore about it than the rest of us. Even if he did take my power to defeat it, it was clear he didn't know where to find it or what it looked like.

Price stared at me, his eyes wide, the emotion behind them flickering between desperation and outrage. "The monster! The demon!" he exclaimed, "You know the one! The one from the shapeshifter origin legend!"

I didn't have a retort, or an response at all. Finally, things were beginning to clear.

The thing years of storytelling had twisted into a bear. But what I knew wasn't a bear. I had seen it through Luka's eyes in my first vision. Towering above the trees, it'd been like a living tornado. It's destruction was worse than any natural disaster I'd seen. One swipe of it's hand and you were dead.

And if thatâ€¦demon was still alive and out thereâ€¦

I glanced at Tommy. The guilt on his face was like nothing I'd ever seen or experienced. Someone, somehow, had trapped this demon in that volcano. And Tommy had inadvertently let it out.

That was why I was connected to Luka. Supernaturals of all kindsâ€”Shira includedâ€”had made her a shapeshifter in the hopes that she could defeat this demon. And, although I hadn't witnessed it, I knew she did. Somehow, she'd used her power to contain the demon and make sure he couldn't hurt anyone else. And now I was supposed to do the same.

"So where is he?" I asked, looking around at the faces surrounding me. "Where is the demon?"

There was now a puddle around Price's feet, but he didn't notice.

"He's out there," Price said vaguely, "Give me your power and I will defeat him."

"No." Shira and I spoke at the same time.

Shira stepped closer to Price. "Only Marina can defeat Seb. You think you can, but you have no idea that you've been playing into his hands the whole time." Faster than I thought possible, Shira threw her hands up and grabbed hold of either side of Price's head.

"Shira, wait!" I yelled, but it was too late.

Soft musical notes flowed from her mouth as her hands turned to water and seeped in his ears. Price stood perfectly still, eyes glazed over as Shira continued to sing. Suddenly she stopped. Price's focus returned and he glared at her with such intense hatred before whispering words I couldn't hear and pushing her away. Shira flew through the air before landing with a soft thud in the sand beside me.

I moved to help her, but she was already standing, her eyes no more than slits as she scanned the crowd. "I can't control him," she whispered to me.

"What does that mean?"

"It means Seb took control first. It means only he can control him," she spat out, eyes still searching for something, or someone.

I followed her gaze, hoping to spot what she was looking for, but the only person I found was Price. I stared at him and he glared back, looking more and more like he was about to attack. "Is he being controlled now?"

"No."

"Last chance, Marina," Price said, power igniting at his fingertips like he'd turned the key of a car. "I can, and will, defeat all of your friends just to get to you if that's what it takes. I know you don't want that to happen, but it's the only reality left. Hand over your power willingly or watch me take out the pitiful force you've assembled."

I knew he wasn't lying. He'd done so much to get to where he was right now and he wasn't going to let some small group of supernaturals, powerless supernaturals, and humans get in his way. He wasn't going to let my stubbornness get in his way. Perhaps it would be easierâ€"saferâ€"for everyone if I just gave in.

Shira snatched my wrist, nails marking my exposed skin. "Don't do it," she breathed, practically reading my mind. "He's here. It's what he wants."

Whether she was referring to Price or the elusive Seb, I didn't know. Either worked. But only one made my insides curl and freeze. Only one made me doubt myself.

On my other side, Jet squeezed my hand, sensing my discomfort. I tried to calm my emotions. When that didn't work, I replaced my fear with anger. Better yet, with determination.

"So what'll it be?" Price asked, his voice booming like the bass in a stereo. "Accept that you aren't strong enough and allow me to take your place? Or attempt to fight a battle you know you can't win?"

I took a deep breath in and locked eyes with Price. I let my voice sound clear over the waves. "Fight."

Someone near the back of Price's group cleared their throat. Eyebrows furrowed and heads turned in search of the source. The turning of heads formed a line in the direction of the person's whereabouts. Price's own neck swiveled around to see who would dare to step in at that moment.

"I was really hoping not to get my hands dirty."

My eyes locked on Sebastian who stepped forward, away from his captors.

Blood rushed to Price's face, anger taking over his features at the sight of the disobedient tribe chief. "What are you doing?" he shouted to his dutiful soldiers, "Restrain him! Keep himâ€" But whatever Price wanted to say, he couldn't seem to get it out. His

mouth moved, but words failed him. Sound failed him. He'd somehow become a mute.

And the hunters surrounding Sebastian suddenly seemed incapable of following orders, incapable of moving, incapable of doing anything at all really.

Sebastian ignored Price's dilemma. He lifted his nose to the sky and took a deep breath in. A dreamy smile fell upon his face, as if he'd just sunk into a warm bath. "Ah," he said as he opened his eyes again, "I smell victory in the air." He raised his tied hands up and, in one fluid motion, separated them. The still secure rope fell to the sand as he held his hands shoulder width apart.

If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it. His hands had passed through the rope, as if they were made of nothing more than air.

As if he were made of air.

I could see it then. I understood why when Price and the hunters attacked the tribe, Sebastian simply surrendered himself to them. They might have taken him but he would never, could never, be their prisoner. Because they were already his.

"Marina, Marina, Marina," he sighed, his voice softer than a summer breeze. His expression was contemplative, and slightly disappointed. "If only you'd listened to Price, things would be so much easier. I had hoped to wrap this up in one easy swoop, but you just like to make things difficult, don't you?"

He smiled, one with hints of laughter behind his eyes. As if he were talking to a child. And to him, I realized, that's exactly what I was. An insignificant child. I was seventeen years old. He was thousands of years old. A comparison couldn't be made.

His smile widened when I didn't respond. It disgusted me.

"I really shouldn't have expected anything less from you. After all, you've been a nuisance from the start," he said casually, the smile dropping from his face.

I suddenly wanted it back. His smile, while creepy, had hidden something from me that was now clear across his face. Danger. I could see the obvious danger he proposed. With one swipe of a hand, he could take us all out.

"Did you know that I've been searching for you ever since Tommy let me out?" His eyes moved in the direction of where Tommy stood beside Price. "I've known about the prophecy since it was first made. And I killed the foolish seer just for speaking the words."

Elota. My breath stuttered inside me. He'd killed Elota after I'd gone. Sebastian—"Seb had killed her.

He continued speaking. If he noticed my reaction he didn't say anything. "So I knew you existed. I knew you were out there somewhere, giving people false hope. But I had hope too. I had hope that I would find you. All I had to do was place myself in the right position and wait. So, I took control of a shapeshifter tribe leader,

killed him from the inside, and waited."

A howl of agony ruptured from Yvette at Seb's words. Still restrained, she fell to her knees in the sand, her face hidden from all. I didn't think I would ever see the day I felt sorry for Yvette. I didn't dare look back to see how Taz was taking the news.

Seb went on as if nothing had happened. "I thought, surely, the only shapeshifter with more than one form would be born in a tribe full of them. But then you had to go and be you, Marina, and be difficult. Because you weren't born in the tribe. Your father had to fake his own death and start a family outside the tribe. Of course, I didn't know this. All I knew was that you weren't in the tribe."

He began to pace up and down the beach between the two lines of forces. "That didn't matter though. I knew I would still find you and I knew I would need the tribe's power when I did. So I kept the tribe on a tight leash—enacting new rules I claimed were for safety purposes, telling them that the hunters were onto us when I already had most of their leaders in my pocket, even making my so-called wife do the enforcing so I wouldn't look like the bad guy.

"Then I began sending out groups with the purpose of finding other shapeshifters—expeditions I called them—hoping that one might find you. It took years, but I still had hope that one group would find you."

His smile returned, almost gleeful this time. "And finally, one did."

I didn't smile back. But again, he didn't seem to notice or care.

A small shadow of annoyance passed over his features. "You know, my whole plan almost went down the drain a few years back. All because of one stupid sixteen-year-old girl." He rolled his eyes for emphasis. "She discovered that I wasn't actually the chief of the tribe and planned to reveal me to everyone. Under normal circumstances, I would have simply demanded her banishment, claiming she broke some rule. But she was Sebastian's daughter of all people, and everyone adored her. I knew they'd believe her over me and using my power seemed like such a waste of time, so I lured her into a trap. Then used my influence over the hunters to have her killed."

Pushing Fawn and another aside, Taz stepped forward and raised the gun in his hands until it was level with Seb's head.

Seb only smiled. "Put the gun down, boy."

"You killed my sister?" he asked. His eyes were wide and his words seemed to shake as they left his lips. "You killed Carolyn?"

"Yes." Seb lifted his hand and with a single flick of his wrist, he knocked the gun out of Taz's hands and sent him flying backwards.

Taz landed on his back with a soft thud in the sand. Fawn immediately took his place, raising her own gun at Seb, venom in her eyes.

"Leave him alone," she shouted.

Seb only sighed loudly. He raised his hand again, only this time he squeezed it in a fist. Fawn immediately fell to her knees, her mouth gaping. Her hands reached up to her throat and she bucked forward, unable to get air into her lungs.

I was frozen, but I knew Seb wasn't controlling meâ€”my own fear was. This couldn't be happening. But it was. Because Seb was an air elemental. He could kill us all simply by stealing the oxygen from our bodies.

"Stop!" Fallon shrieked, rushing to her twin's side. She put a hand on her sister's back, but there didn't seem to be anything she could do. Fawn couldn't breathe. She was suffocating even though plenty of clean air surrounded her. Tears pricked at the corners of Fallon's eyes as we watched her sister begin to die of asphyxiation.

An explosion sounded across the beach. A rattling of repeated debris echoed in my ears, an after effect to a gun being fired in such close proximity.

He shot him.

Brad shot Seb. Right in the heart.

My hearing returned and with it came the sound of fevered gasps. Fawn was breathing again. Thank god.

If I hadn't heard the gunshot myself, I wouldn't have believed Brad had actually done it. But he had. He shot Seb directly in the chest. The worst part was that Seb was still alive. Somehow, he was still standing. It was as if the bullet hadn't even hit him.

Seb stared down at his chest, studying the hole where the bullet had entered like it was a small flower that had just bloomed. He reached a hand up and, using his thumb and index finger, plucked the bullet from his chest. Again, his fingers passed through as if they were made of nothing more than air.

I watched as Seb let the bullet drop into the sand where it was immediately lost.

Ah, shit. We were so doomed.

Maybe, if I convinced people to make a run for it, they might survive. Like I told Jet earlier, I always knew there was a chance I wouldn't survive. Now I knew for sure that I wouldn't. So be it. I could put up a hell of a fight.

Seb's expression hardened as he looked up at Brad. "That wasn't very smart," he said as he wandered over to where Price stood.

Price stared him down, unblinking, clearly trying not to show any fear. I wasn't so sure he was succeeding.

"You stole all those animal forms thinking you could use them to defeat me. That's cute," Seb said, cocking his head to one side. "But even with that extra power you can't. So you might as well just give it to me."

With that Seb plunged his entire hand into Price's chest. Price's eyes widened and he opened his mouth to get air, but, like Fawn, none could enter. Seb held Price up, allowing him to use his body for support. Colorful light began to swirl around the spot in Price's chest as Price himself seemed to grow weaker. Finally, Seb withdrew his hand and let go of Price, allowing him to slump to the ground.

Tommy fell to his knees beside his master, searching his body for a pulse. I didn't need Tommy's slow shake of the head to know that Price was dead—that Seb had just killed him.

Shaking out his arms as if loosing up, Seb turned back to me and smiled. "There," he sighed, "Now I've got your powers too, Marina." He tilted his head from side to side, cracks issuing from the joints of his bones. "I wonder who has more animal forms. Shall we find out?"

He rolled his shoulders back and closed his eyes. The shift undulated throughout his body, shimmers of a new skin emerging over the old. His clothing teared and four gigantic paws appeared. Shaking out the mane of his new lion head, Seb let out a earth-shattering roar.

I turned to look at Shira, questioning how it was possible that Seb just shifted, but her gaze was focused solely on him. Remembering that all supernaturals had to have come from an elemental at some point, and that Price had taken all those animal forms from the shapeshifters' forms that I was sure now resided in Seb—I deduced that somehow it was very possible. And, I thought with a smile, things just became a whole lot easier. Thanks to Fallon, I was trained for this. I was ready for whatever animal he threw at me. This way, I could beat him.

Stalking forward, Seb advanced on me, his army of hunters following close behind.

Beside me, Jet let go of my hand. My fingers flailed to find his again, but they were gone. He shifted into his black wolf and jumped in front of me, baring his teeth at Seb.

Seb returned to his normal form. "Your friends annoy me." He narrowed his eyes at Jet. "

I saw fire forming behind his lips, set to destroy everything in his path, as he raised a hand, but I knew there was nothing I could do to stop it. To stop him. Just as Shira had last year, Seb would control anyone he wanted, and make them do anything he wanted. I couldn't stop that.

Still, I had to try. I rushed for Jet, desperation to pull him out of firing range propelling me forward. But Seb's hand was already raised, his eyes already slicing through Jet. The skin on Seb's hand faded away, leaving nothing but a hazy outline in the air. One twist and a blast of air was hurled at Jet. Just knowing he would be hit, I felt like I'd died inside.

And then, Tommy was there. Appearing out of thin air, right in the middle of Jet and Seb. The elemental's force of air hit him in the face and twisted his head around two times, snapping his neck in the

process.

A second later and Tommy fell to the sand. His eyes were open. But he couldn't see.

43. One of Many Forms

****Thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter and a special thanks to _CelticH2O_ for reviewing every chapter she missed (you didn't have to do that but I love you for it)!****

****Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. It's been waaaaay too long. I'm sorry. I promise there will not be as much time between chapters ever again. I am almost done with the chapter after this and then there's only one more. I promise to get both out by June 18th. There. Now it's in writing and I have to abide by my own deadline.****

****Okay, so more soon but, for now, I hope you enjoy reading this chapter!****

* * *

><p>The sight of his crumpled body triggered something inside me, something inhuman, something feral. I snarled behind my canines, unable to remember when exactly I had shifted into my wolf form. But I didn't care. Because Tommy was dead. He was dead because of Seb. Because Seb had tried to kill Jet. And Tommy had stepped in front of him.<p>

My oldest friendâ€”the boy I could remember digging deep holes in the sand with during recessâ€”was dead. The mistakes he made no longer mattered. He'd tried to make up for them, not in the best way, but he'd tried. And in that attempt he'd protected Jet. Jet was still here because of Tommy. Jet was here. And Tommy was not. He was justâ€”gone. And now I was going to make Seb pay.

Seb returned to the lion form he stole and stepped forward. I too moved closer to him, positioning myself in front of Jet and Tommy, protecting both of them from further harm. I bared my teeth at Seb, the moonlight illuminating their white surfaces.

My growl was like the starting gun in a race. Everyone behind me charged forward as Seb's unwilling forces came out to meet them. Chaos erupted like a fully loaded volcano. And all hell broke loose.

Brad and Fallon, along with Nathan, Connor, Zach and my own parents, rushed forward, each with guns in their hands. They aimed low, shooting Seb's brainwashed soldiers in the feet or legs whenever they got the chance. Nathan caught his wife around the middle, tossing her gun into the ocean. But she didn't give up easily, and immediately starting throwing punches. Her husband met her blow for blow.

Cole and Kayleigh ran through the crowd, snatching guns out of peoples' hands any time they had the chance while Skye and Lila flew above, doing the same, Lila even managing to put a few soldiers to sleep. Emma, Max, and Bella used their combined powers to freeze or slow down anyone within the crashing ocean waves' range. Kiara and Kye were somehow combining powers to trap people in the sand. Every

tribe member was fierce like the animal forms they lost, fighting the hardest. Swiping, punching, kicking at anything they could touch. At the back of the pack, Eloise and Milos worked together, her writing down wishes for him to use, Deirdre doing her best to guard them both. Jet stuck to my side but didn't try to get in front of me, instead taking out anyone who dared distract me from Seb.

Bullets flew through the air, hitting sand, limbs, and air. A sorcerer working for Seb sent fireballs into the mix. While he didn't actually manage to hit anyone, his explosions lit up the dark sky like strange fireworks made out of pompoms.

While the chaos surrounding us seemed to bother Seb, his sole focus was on me. His eyes never leaving my body. I briefly wondered if he was afraid he might lose track of me with all these other people around. Maybe he had more than one reason for wanting me to come alone.

Oh well. I hadn't come alone. And, despite Tommy's death, I didn't regret that. I'd have to see how I felt come morning though.

Seb plunged forward, his mane flowing around his neck. It took all I had not to laugh. A lion was so typical of a power hungry maniac like Seb. What he didn't know was there were many ways to defeat a big cat. And a big reptile was one of them. I waited, watching as Seb barreled down on me. Any second now. Just one more step. There.

He was three feet from me when I shifted. Seb tried to stop, but he was already too close and moving too fast. He slid in the sand as I opened my mouth wide and snapped my huge jaw down on one of his front legs. He growled, but to his credit, didn't cry out even though having your leg between the teeth of an alligator had to hurt like hell.

He returned to his non-corporeal form and basically breathed out of my mouth. Becoming clearly visible again, he shifted and I found myself facing a hippopotamus. His mouth, now much bigger than mine, reached down, ready to pluck me from the earth. I didn't let him. Shifting smaller, I changed into a hare and darted around the hippo, making him pick up nothing but a mouthful of sand.

He changed into a fox to chase the rabbit. I wondered if this was Fawn's animal form I was facing. I turned into my normal wolf. Back and forth and back and forth we went. Shifting constantly. Taking whatever swipe we could at each other.

He lunged and I shifted, sliding beneath him. I caught him around his back ankle, coiling my new body around his leg and sinking my two-inch fangs into his inner thigh. He howled, his distorted voice unheard by any of his fighters. They were too busy haphazardly fighting my friends and allies. Finally, I could catch my breath. The venom in my bite would spread quickly, paralyzing him, even despite his size.

Except it didn't take him down. He quickly returned to his air form before finding another animal shape to inhabit. He couldn't shift between animal forms without reverting back to air. Which meant, if we could take out the animal forms all we'd have left was him. The air demon. And we had no way to stop air.

But perhaps there was a way to stop him. The four of us—me, Jet, Bella, and Tommy—had managed to stop Shira. We hadn't killed her of course, but we were able to imprison her to keep her from controlling or harming anyone else. And that was what we had to do with Seb too. The only problem—we didn't have a prison. But maybe Shira could help with that.

I ran as fast as I could towards Seb and he patiently waited for me, thinking I couldn't possibly harm him as just a wolf. But, at the last second, I shifted, more than doubling my size and strength. I ran my giant horn right through his center, blood splattered everywhere.

I drew back, rushing for my allies. Seb was down. But only for a short time. Fallon, along with a group from the tribe, converged on him, emptying their guns into his body.

I ran for Shira. I had to know if she knew a way to defeat her brother. Jet was at my side immediately, and Bella appeared beside Shira.

"Is there any way, any place, we could trap him? Like a prison?" I asked. Placing a hand on Jet's shoulder, I leaned into him.

"Not really," Shira said. "As long as there's air, he's invincible."

"But it's been done before," I reminded her. "Luka trapped him and he was trapped in that volcano until—until he was let out." I can't bring myself to say Tommy's name aloud.

"True, but do you see a volcano anywhere?" Shira asked, her breath short and her words curt.

"What about an underwater one?" Bella suggested, gesturing out to the open ocean. "I bet Emma, Max, and I could find one off the coast if we split up to search."

Jet shook his head. "Even if you do find one, you're never going to get him out to it."

"Exactly," Shira agreed. "You're lucky my brother's this close to water. If I hadn't done nearly everything he told me to, he would have had me killed just like my other brother and sister."

"Fine," I said, "so we can't get him out into the water. But maybe we could bring the water to him?" I stared at Shira, wondering if she was really willing to put her own brother in a grave.

"Just tell me what to do and I'll do it. And don't worry about me," she said, reading my mind. "I won't lose sleep at night over him. Not after what he did to my other siblings."

I nodded. "Okay, if we can manage to take his air supply away, we might have a chance."

"How do we do that?" Bella asked.

Shira waved an arm and hit Seb with a blast of water. He didn't so much as stumble. "Oxygen."

We stared at her. Again, she wasn't making any sense. I wondered if this was a common thing for her. It did seem to happen a lot.

"They call him an air demon for a reason," she snapped. "He feeds mostly off oxygen. Take that away and he'll be weakened."

I smiled. "And I know exactly how to do that. I think I have an idea as to how to contain him but, Shira, I'll need your help with that."

"Marina!" Fallon shouted over the gusts of wind whipping across the beach. She turned to me, her gun pointed out in front of her. "We can't hold him!"

I looked over to her. "Fallon!" I screamed. Seb, a panther now, was headed straight for her, claws extended. She turned to run but tripped over a fallen body. She raised a hand to shield herself just as Seb came on her. Another gunshot rang out, higher than the others, and Seb fell to the ground a bullet in his head. Both Brad and I ran over to Fallon.

"Are you okay?" Brad breathed, holding out a hand to help her up.

"Fine," Fallon nodded, shifting her gun to her opposite hand and allowing Brad to pull her off the ground. I was the only one who saw the smirk on her face.

"What did you do?" I asked, eyeing Seb. There was no way a simple bullet could take him down. We saw him pull the other one out of his chest.

Brad clicked the clip of bullets out of his gun, holding one up for us to see. "They're the magic bullets," he said, a triumphant smile on his face. "The ones that explode if a person shifts."

I watched as Seb returned to his air form and tried shifting into the same panther. The panther appeared but only for a second before a loud pop sounded and bits of blood, fur, skull, and bullet splattered the sand. A jagged hole was visible at the top of the panther's head.

Fallon eyed the bullets like they were the sweetest candy. "You got any more of those?"

Brad reached into his pocket and pulled out three more clips. Without asking, Fallon grabbed one out of his hand and switched it with the bullets already in her gun. Smacking the clip into place, she said, "Let's do this."

Seb stirred, the dead black panther melting away, leaving nothing but air. I knew we didn't have long. "Brad, Fallon," I said, "don't go crazy with those bullets. Shoot once every time he shifts into a new animal. I'm hoping they'll keep him from using the injured forms again." They both nod and Brad hands Fallon another clip to hold on to. "Jet, Bella, I need to you to keep everyone else away from Seb, or at least isolate the fighting. Get whoever you can to help you." Jet quick pecked me on the cheek then shifted, racing around the beach and herding people to one side. Bella wasn't far behind him.

"Shira?"

"Right here," a melodic voice echoed.

I turned to see Shira in her water form, what looked like an extensive veil of water strewn out behind her. "You're with me."

"Ay ay, cap-i-tan," she said.

I would have rolled my eyes had a gust of wind not knocked me off my feet. Jumping back up, I saw Seb standing a few feet away from me. His air form dissolved as he shifted again. This time into a tiger. Man, he sure did have a thing for large cats. But, even if he did, I needed him in his air form if we hoped to weaken him. I had to make him think that his real form, his air form, was the only one he could fight in.

"Brad!" I shouted, "Shoot!"

He shot, nailing Seb once again between the eyes. Seb stumbled back, but not before returning to his natural form. It lasted less than a second before he was another cat, a jaguar this time.

"Falâ€"" I began to call Fallon's name, to instruct her to shoot, but she was already way ahead of me. Another magic bullet lodged itself in Seb's head. He snarled before becoming air again and then shifted into a polar bear. Brad shot him again. Seb abandoned the polar bear in favor of a unicorn. He would have been beautiful had he not charged Brad, his sharpened horn pointed at his heart.

Brad held up his gun, taking aim, but didn't fire. "I can't get a clear shot!" he yelled. "The horn's blocking me."

"Fallon!" I called to her. She had her gun pointed at Seb, lining up her shot. Seb was getting closer. Brad rolled to get out of the way, but Seb only redirected his path. "Fallon!" I screamed. "Shoot him!"

Seb was gaining on Brad. And still, Fallon didn't shoot. He'd impale him in five, fourâ€| I shifted into a dragon and emptied my lung capacity of fire at the unicorn. He easily avoided it. Three, twoâ€|one.

Seb fell to the ground just short of Brad. I swung my head around to see Fallon. With the biggest smirk on her face, she held her gun up to her mouth and blew the smoke away from the muzzle. "That's how it's done," she said.

But a second later, Seb was air again. Spotting my dragon, he only smiled. "Nice choice," he said before turning into Sebastian's blackish-purple dragon. This time when he roared, blue flames came out of his mouth. I had faced this dragon before. Last fall when Sebastian had come to take me to the tribe and the hunters attacked. Except, that time, the dragon had been on my side. And now I had to fight him. Good thing I had a dragon of my own.

I added my own fire to mix with his. Orange and blue flames twisted, fighting for control of the air. Seb was too busy fighting fire with fire to realize the dilemma he'd be in once he was forced to become air again. The flames were hungry.

I didn't have to call Brad's name. His shot rang clear in my ears as he landed another bullet perfectly between Seb's jet-black eyes. Seb fell to the earth. His wings failing him, he dropped on the sand, right beside a line of flames. Taking a deep breath in, I released more fire, creating a circle around him.

The dark dragon faded, leaving just Seb, his air. The flames flicked out, hungry for the food he could provide. Seb reached for the sky, eager to escape.

I launched myself into the sky, and remembering Taz's words, I shifted. The new form was enormous. Much larger than anything I was accustomed to. I felt the power beneath my wings. Using the giant wingspan of my thunderbird, I flapped my wings. The effect was instantaneous.

My gust of wind slammed Seb back down to the ground, the fire surrounding him once again. In the air, I shifted back to my dragon and sent more bursts of flame towards Seb. His form shrunk as the fire ate at him. But it wasn't enough. Even with the fire feeding on him, he drew strength from the oxygen in the air. More fire. Still, Seb floated higher into the air. I shifted back into the thunderbird, forcing him back onto the sand. Again and again, I shifted between the two forms to contain Seb. But my efforts were futile and my strength was diminishing. I couldn't keep him down long enough for the flames to completely engulf him.

I glimpsed the crowd on the beach. Most everyone had stopped their fighting to watch my own. Jet's expression was tight, fear echoed on his features. My eyes met a pair of crystal, blue-hued eyes. I sent Shira a fearful glance. I wasn't sure if I could do this.

Shira nodded. I knew she didn't need any further encouragement.

"Wait!" Bella reached out and grabbed Shira's hand. "You can't do this."

Shira smiled at her, something akin to love or pride on her face. "He's my older brother," she said. "It's only fitting that I pick on him." She shrugged. "It's kind of my job. Take care of yourself, tail girl. And cause a little trouble for me from time to time." She shot Bella a quick wink.

After that, she didn't look back. Shira darted between the flames, guiding a wave of water over them and forcing the wave down on Seb.

The center of the circle was a conglomeration of flame, air, and water. While the fire hungered for Seb, it pushed at Shira, weakening her form as well. But she hung onto her brother, keeping him the blaze, weighing him down. I shot fireball after fireball at them both. The flames climbed higher and higher, larger and larger until I could no longer make out the water and air entangled in the middle.

A form appeared at the top of the fire, air shaped like an arm. The tendril of air, weak but thick, wrapped around my leg. No. Seb wasn't going to escape.

I shifted one more time, holding the last of my strength in the wings of the giant thunderbird. With one last push, I forced the air all around us down. I fed the fire. But Seb didn't let go of me.

With a lurch, I was pulled down with Seb, into the conflagration. Pain erupted over my skin. My nerves were literally on fire, the burning consumed me. There was nothing but flame and heat. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't break free.

The inferno swallowed me whole.

44. Rising Sun

****Thank you for all your wonderful reviews! Sorry I ended the last chapter in a cliffhanger again (they're just too much fun to write). I'm pretty sure this chapter doesn't end in one, but that's all a matter of opinion. Someone might say it does. Good thing there's one more chapter after this!****

****Speaking of which...unfortunately the end (of this series) is coming. I honestly can't believe we're here, at the penultimate chapter. It's been such a long journey and I'm so happy to have had the chance to share it with all of you.****

****One last thing. I don't normally do this, but I have to share. While writing this chapter and the next, I listened to one song on repeat: "Renegades" by X Ambassadors. I feel like the song really fits Marina's feelings in regard to the end of her story. So if you get the chance and want to listen, I recommend the song.****

****I'll talk more later but, for now, enjoy. :)****

* * *

<p>The night was dead.</p>

Even though the sky was a lit with the light from the blazing fire, its sparks floating higher and higher, things were dead. The air was dead. The ocean was dead. The ground. The trees. The night. Time. Everything, just dead.

He was dead.

Physically, Jet knew was fine. Only a few scratches and bruises to show from the brutal fight. But those could have been caresses compared to the sharp scar repeatedly slashing his heart. He was beyond damaged. He would never recover. There was no bringing back the dead. Because she wasn't the only one to die. He'd been in that fire too.

Silence beat into him, breaking him in ways no physical blow ever could. His thoughts stabbed at his heart, betraying him just as the fire had her. He'd promised himself he would never leave her, not again. And he hadn't. He'd never considered she might leave him. She'd warned him it could happen. But he didn't believe her. Because he thought he could protect her. Seeing the flames pull her into themâ€|he didn't understand. Surely she was stronger than a bit of fire. Fire she created. He'd seen her fight. A bit of heat and flame

couldn't take her down.

But they had. She wasn't there. Only the fire remained, reaching out and searching for new food. He could offer to give it his own body. He wouldn't feel it burn his flesh away. His pain was already all consuming. But he didn't move. He could only stare at the mutinous flares spiking in the sky.

She couldn't be gone.

He wanted her. He needed her. He loved her. More than anyone, more than anything. Life didn't exist without her.

He was dead without her.

Pearls of water filled his eyes and leaked out onto his cheeks. He didn't close his eyes though. He was afraid if he did then he would solidify this moment in time. That it forever be written that Marina had died in fire with the enemy.

Cries of despair reached his ears. Her family. Her other friends. Grief settled around them like a dense fog. Thick. Heavy. Inescapable.

His fists pounded the sand. Anger and despair thrashed inside him. Memories floated across his mind. Her smile stared at him, her laugh licked his ears, the feel of her skin beneath his hands sang to him. None of that would ever exist again.

Why?

Amidst the tears, a few groans of confusion were let go. People under Seb's control were waking up. Screams followed the groans as people discovered the dead bodies at their feet, the blood and sand mixed between their toes.

But he didn't care about anyone else. He didn't want to know who else they'd lost. He'd thought Tommy was bad. But Marina—

She was the only person who mattered to him.

Was? No. This wasn't real. She wasn't gone. _Please_, she couldn't be gone.

The fire only laughed at his pleas. It was happy by the death it caused. A few smiles were breathed out into the air to accompany the fire's delight—some people were unable to contain their glee over Seb's death, despite the despair all around.

It made him want to throw something. To knock his frustration and grief into these people's heads with his fists. He grasped at the sand in front of him. Holding handfuls, he threw them at the fire. He reached for more and threw it again. Over and over again he chucked sand at the flames.

Slowly, they began to die down, folding in on themselves. He was killing them. Tears fell in the holes he was digging, but he didn't stop. And it wasn't enough. The fire still clung to life. But where was her life?

Threads of light wove up from the horizon, stitching their way into the sky. The sun was on its way. He remembered the line from the prophecy: _only one can join the sun at dawn._

If that were true then where was the one? He swore that if that air demon emerged from the flames he was going to kill him himself. Screw the fact that Seb was an elemental and far more powerful than him. He'd find a way to kill the monster that murdered her.

A flame stretched toward the sky and with a burst of light, something erupted from its tip. Red and orange separated from the rest of the fire, gliding across a blue backdrop. It was fire, but it wasn't. The thing in the sky wasn't as bright as the blaze. And it moved—it moved of its own accord.

The shape solidified before his eyes. Burnt red wings and a brilliant orange tail outlined a majestic bird. A phoenix.

He didn't dare breathe. The bird craned its head in his direction, a beady black eye locked on his figure. With one long swoop, the phoenix soared towards him. It landed on the sand in front of him.

Its bright feathers shimmered, skin rippling beneath them. The feathers shrunk back and the bird grew, its shape changing and shifting to reveal smooth, light skin, flowing brown hair, and a pair of warm, blinking, brown eyes.

Marina.

Jet choked on a sob as he reached for me. His arms encased me and I wove mine around him, clinging to him. I could feel his tears of relief trailing down my back. My own tears circled his neck as I buried my face in his nape. I clutched him, never wanting to let go.

As long as he was here, as long as this existed, nothing could ever be wrong again. We would be okay. Better than that really. We would be great. We would be incredible. We would be happy. Together.

Time didn't exist as we simply held each other.

I suddenly knew we weren't alone. Lifting my head, I found Fallon smiling at me. Brad was by her side, close enough that their shoulders were touching.

Raising her eyebrows at me, Fallon smirked and said, "Adjusting to the situation?"

Jet pulled back, looking at our companions, but neither of us let go of the other. I was sure Jet and I never wanted to be separated again. It was like he was my other half and I wasn't complete without him.

I smiled at Fallon and nodded. "I had a great teacher," I said.

More people approached us. Jet and I stood. My parents were the first of the new group to embrace me. I was happy to see they were both unharmed. As were Skye and Cole. Skye had a jagged cut above her one eyebrow, but, other than that, they were all fine. Finally, my family

was safe.

Hugs from Bella, Kayleigh, Eloise, Milos, Lila, and Taz followed. The whole time, I never let go of Jet's hand. But, even amongst the crowd and cries of thanks and praise, I noticed there were a few people missing.

A tug at my hand grabbed my attention. I turned to meet Jet's eyes. His gaze was full of sadness and understanding. He knew who I was looking for. Staying close, I let him lead me through the groups of people.

There, off to the side, with the incoming waves just barely missing them, were Grace, Annie, and Connor. Annie held Connor's hand tight as he unashamedly sobbed on Grace's shoulder. Each of them knelt in front of Tommy's dead body.

Tears filled my eyelids until they overflowed. Jet wrapped his arm around me as we bent down beside our friends. Slowly, Brad, Fallon, and Bella approached us. Nobody said a word, everyone choosing to remain silent. Respect for the fallen mixed with reflection and relief.

No. We'd won today. We couldn't lose. Tommy was included in that. He had to be.

My head swiveled in all directions, searching for one person. The only person I could think of who might be able to reverse this. Who could help Tommy.

With my vision swimming, my eyes locked in on Milos. "Milos!" I shouted, my voice hitching. "I wish for you to save him! Save Tommy!"

I knew he was deaf and couldn't hear me, but that didn't seem to matter. He understood what I wanted him to do. But he didn't move. Milos only stared at me, pity pooling in his eyes. Silently, he shook his head.

"He can't bring the dead back to life," Brad whispered, grief echoing behind his words. My gaze flicked to him, his lips twitched but he didn't say anything else. I watched as Brad's hand reached out to take Fallon's. She wound her fingers through his.

A faint smile hesitated on my face before I turned back to Tommy. I could have been the one on the ground, the life sucked from me. It could have been Jet. It could have been any of us. But Tommy made sure it wasn't. He sacrificed himself to ensure we had a chance to fight. A chance to win.

In that moment, any other acts were erased from my mind. None of them mattered. I wanted to remember him this way. As my friend. As the one who would do anything to save us. He fought against Shira with us last year. He warned us about Price before the concert. He helped us to hide. He infiltrated the enemy in hopes of giving us an advantage. He freed Shira, knowing we couldn't beat Seb without her. He saved us.

That was who he was.

I don't know how long we were gathered around Tommy's body. Long enough for the sun to rise.

The start of a new day. A day free of pressure. Free of the prophecy. Free of responsibility. I was finally free to simply live. I never wanted to hear the word "prophecy" again.

A cry of joy sounded across the beach. I turned at the noise, wondering what was the cause for celebration. Fallon's sister, Fawn, stood in front of a circle of tribe members, the biggest smile on her face. She closed her eyes and, in the next second, her body changed, leaving a fox in her place. The fox pawed at the sand and jumped in the air before she shifted back into human form. She shifted again and again, just to prove she could.

All around us, everyone who'd had their animal forms stolen by Price shifted back and forth between human and animal. I watched Cole turn into his tiger and my father into his mountain lion. The beach was filled with a complete menagerie. It was a beautiful sight.

The moment broke with a single click. A click that could only be that of a bullet locking into a gun. I was on my feet before I thought to move them.

Brad's mother stood in front of Cole, a pistol pointed at his head. She was frowning, but there was something in her expression—"maybe it was the way she pressed her lips together"—that told me her heart wasn't in the threat.

I intended to go to her, to confront her, but Nathan beat me to it. Helen's husband walked right in front of her gun, standing between her and Cole. He didn't say anything to her. He seemed to say everything he needed to with his eyes. Reaching out, Nathan took the pistol from Helen's hands. In a couple swift movements, he unloaded the weapon, letting the bullets and gun fall to the sand.

And with that, the cold, fierce hunter who once shot me, faded away, leaving only Brad's mother and Nathan's wife. She collapsed in Nathan's arms, her tears joining everyone else's.

All around, hunters eyed the shapeshifters warily. The battle might have been over, but the distrust was still there. If I didn't do something about it now, the war would never end.

I ran for the woods, climbing the incline to stand in front of the line of trees and above everyone else. Jet, Brad, and Fallon followed me. I took a deep breath as Jet squeezed my right hand and Brad grabbed the left with Fallon on his other side. We stood together, higher than the beach.

My eyes wandered the group before me, seeing my family, my friends, my allies, and my former enemies before they fell on the sunrise. I felt like the sun's bright rays were encouraging me, giving me the confidence to do what was needed.

Raising my voice, I addressed the entire beach. "The sun has risen again," I told everyone. All attention was on me and, with my friends by my side, I welcomed it. "It's a new day. We should embrace it. Be grateful we are alive to see it. Because we are alive. We all survived this.

"There may not be a lot we have in common, but remember that we have that. We have this moment. We have this sunrise. Last night is a part of the past. With this new day we should create something new."

"We are all people," Brad said, joining in. He glanced over at me and our eyes met. We both smiled. I couldn't do this without him. "Like everyone else, we all have different skills and no one, no one, deserves to be killed or hunted for their talents. For something that might make them special. We should embrace each other. We should work together to create a new world. It's our world, so let's show it what we're made of!"

Letting go of my hand, Brad raised a fist to the brightening sky. Then he turned his back to me and seized Fallon, planting a kiss on her lips. But it didn't last long. Slamming both hands into Brad's chest she shoved him away from her. The scowl painted on her face melted into a smirk.

"I wanted to be the first to do that," she reprimanded to him. Reaching up, Fallon placed her hands on either side of Brad's face and pulled his lips down to hers. She kissed him long and hard, with the same fierceness I'd seen her use when fighting. He happily kissed her back.

A huge smile broke through my cheeks, and my first laugh of the day leaked out. I looked to my right and Jet beamed at me. Filled with happiness, I turned back to the crowd.

"We have an extraordinary power. We are the influential ones," I exclaimed. "Each and every one of us holds the power to mold the future. To create a better world. And that power is the strongest of them all."

I surveyed the people before me. Only one thing blinked back at me.

Hope.

"So let's live today and change tomorrow!"

45. Changes

The next few weeks were the beginning.

The beginning of the unknown. The beginning of an infinite number of wonderful possibilities.

I don't think I smiled more in my entire life.

I even smiled through tears during the funeral for Tommy. Sadness and happiness intertwined inside me that morning as I remembered the first time he showed me his magic. He'd changed the color of my shirt from purple to green, and when I still didn't believe him, he added tiny wolf heads to the front. I'd laughed so hard, refusing his offers to change the shirt back for me. I still had the changed shirt in one of my drawers. I planned to wear it my first day back at school. And that's exactly what I did, not even noticing the strange looks I got. I'm going to wear it again soon.

Most of the supernaturals who showed up to fight faded back into the shadows of society once things settled down. Many, including Milos, Kayleigh, Emma, Max, Kiara, and Kye, promised to spread my message of acceptance and cooperation. It was nice to know they took my words to heartâ€”that they'd be out there trying to change the world.

Eloise disappeared the day after the battle. I still wasn't sorry to see her go. If I only see her one more time over the course of my life it will be too many. I hope she never has another vision of my future. I prefer to keep it a mystery.

After staying a few extra days for Tommy's funeral and just some much needed relaxing beach days, Bella flew back to Australia. I asked her if she planned on honoring Shira's troublemaking wishes.

"Maybe not how she would expect," she told me. "But, yeah, in my own way, I think I will."

I wanted her to stay longer, but she said her other mermaid friends needed her. I knew she'd be all too happy to help them in whatever way she could. Maybe she'll even end up saving the world.

All the tribe members returned home once the battle was over. Though the losses were minimal, Ryan, my shifting trainer from the tribe, was one of the people who lost his life in the battle, along with one of the immortals from the town and two tribe members I hadn't known. The tribe members were given proper burials back at the tribe. Taz told Fallon she was welcome to come with them, even offering her a position on the council in the tribe. She refused. She claimed she wanted to exercise her freedom and use it to discover the world. But, for now, she decided to continue living with my family. And she said she'll stay at least until she starts college. We'll see how long that lasts.

Instead of simply taking his father's place, Taz held an election in the tribe. He let the people decide who they wanted to lead. The vote ended in a tie. Now, Taz and Fawn work together. According to Fallon, the pair's first move as the new leaders is to put the tribe on the map. They want to make the tribe a real U.S.A. town. With the fence already gone, they're hoping the time for hiding is in the past.

Same goes for my own town. Of course, we're not exactly spreading the word that supernaturals exist, but, after the exposure at the concert and the number of people under Seb's control, it was kind of impossible to keep everything a secret. A majority of the town now knows about the existence of supernaturals. And after learning what Price was really up to, people were more willing to accept us. Life is much easier now because of that.

Grace, Annie, and Connor have fully embraced my and Jet's shapeshifter side. Annie in particular has asked me repeatedly if she can swim with me as a dolphin. Tommy's mother let Connor take Tommy's supernatural encyclopedia. I know he misses his best friend more than anything and Connor's taken it upon himself to take Tommy's place as our human library. Every day at lunch he surprises us with a new fact about a supernatural. It still surprises me how there is still so much we don't know.

A few days after the beach battle, Skye walked in the house and announced to anyone listening that she and Zachary Rubin were officially dating. I asked her if they'd been on a date yet. She was reluctant to admit that no, that hadn't gone on a date, but was quick to point out that neither had Jet and I. She then went on to brag about how she was off the market until Cole asked how much Zach had paid for her and said he'd pay more if she shut up.

Cole decided to drop out of school. After the number of classes he missed, he wasn't going to pass the semester anyway. Still, our parents were beyond pissed. He hasn't told them yet, but he wants to go live in the tribe. Losing his tiger form made him realize how big a part of himself it really is. He wants his life to revolve around that part of him and see if he can help make a difference in the tribe. Though I don't want him to leave, I want to support him the way he's always supported me.

But the best part about being able to relax in my own house was that my father was finally home, and my family was all together again. We're whole. That doesn't mean things are normal. Nowhere near that. But that's okay. I don't want normal anyway. Because, overall, things are just better as they are.

The other day Fallon told me Brad asked her out. They're going on their first official date a week from Saturday. She keeps pestering Brad to tell her where he's taking her, but his mouth remains firmly shut on that topic. I can tell it's driving Fallon nuts. But I can also tell she's really excited. And super happy.

Brad's happy too. I think he smiles more than me these days. Any argument he has with Fallon always ends in laughter. And despite his family losing their whole profession, things are going well at home for him. Brad said his mother and father have been throwing around the idea of starting a school for self-defense. I told him I think it's a great idea, and both Fallon and Jet agree. Fallon even offered to be one of the instructors.

Brad and Nathan officially introduced Jet as their brother, son, and a shapeshifter to the rest of the family. Helen was surprisingly understanding and welcoming of Jet. They're planning entire family dinners every other Sunday night. Deirdre even's been invited to join them, seeing as she and Jet now live together. Jet says that once the awkwardness dies down, he wants me to come too. Hunters and shapeshifters all under one roof. It's incredible. Not perfect, but probably as close as it's going to get.

There is one thing in my that's perfect. Me and Jet. Without life threatening events and power-hungry people out to get us, Jet and I can just be us. Jet can be himself. And I don't have to be Luka or the "one of many forms" or whatever. I'm finally able to be me. And, maybe most importantly, we can be "we" together. Who knows? Maybe we'll have a real date one of these days. Candles, roses, and all.

I peeked at the time on my phone, before stowing it in my pocket.

Crap.

It was already half past three. The weather was absolutely beautiful today. Flowers were in the air, birds sang, the breeze whistled, and

the sweet temperature caressed my exposed skin. It was the first spring day we'd had all year. And I wanted to enjoy it. I was enjoying it, but I'd gotten a little carried away coming home from school.

Locking my Jeep, I walked around to the backyard. Jet was waiting for me along the tree line behind my house. "You're late," he said.

"Yeah, sorry," I said, my neck creeping toward my shoulders. "Bella called, she wanted to catch up."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "You're lying."

I know I overdid my shocked expression. "What? I am not," I protested.

"Oh yeah? What'd you two talk about?"

I shrugged. "You know, the usual stuff."

"Like what?"

"Likeâ€¦uhâ€¦girl stuff?"

His face told me he wasn't buying one second of my crap story. I was such a terrible liar.

"Why can I never fool you?"

Jet shook his head, a smirk teasing his lips. Pointing to his head, he said, "Lie detector, remember?"

I groaned and rolled my head around my shoulders. "Of course. Bella didn't call," I relented.

He raised his black eyebrows at me. "So where were you?"

"Fallon and I took the scenic route home."

"It can't be more scenic than our route."

Smiling, I recalled the breathtaking scenes that awaited us. "True." I sighed. "Nothing compares."

I reached for the end of my dress as Jet lifted his t-shirt up and over his head. I pulled my dress off, letting it fall to the ground. The sun was warm on my bare back.

"Just don't stop to smell the roses out there," he teased. "I don't want you too far behind me."

My head snapped up. "What makes you think I'll be behind you?"

He unbuttoned his shorts and tilted his head to one side. "Aren't you usually?"

"I am not," I said quickly, though I struggled to remember a time I had actually won one of our races.

He shrugged his shoulders. "If you say so," he said, "Why don't you prove me wrong?" Dropping his last article of clothing, he shifted into his black wolf.

"I will," I said before shifting as well, my paws needing the dirt.

We didn't need a starting gun for our race. Or a track. One look at each other and we took off. Darting through the trees, I relished in the feeling of the wind blowing my fur. With every step, the ground pushed me further until I felt like, with just one more little shove, I could be soaring instead of running.

Jet was right. I was behind him. But not for long.

His feet glided along like he was walking on air, like this was the easiest thing in the world. Finding the strength and energy within, I forced myself to move faster. Seconds passed, but I was gaining.

Just a little further.

He let out a laugh of a bark before pulling ahead again. No. I was so close! I didn't want to give up. I wouldn't give up.

I lunged for Jet.

And crashed right into him. All four pairs of feet lost contact with the ground as we tumbled. Together, we rolled through dirt and brush and blooming flowers, only stopping when our momentum let us. We landed side by side, our limbs very tangled. The sun shone through the canopy of trees. Strands of Jet's black fur caught the rays and reflected them back at me.

Staring at each other, we shifted back to human form at the same time. Our laughter joined the coos of the birds and the excited rustles of small animals.

I leaned forward and kissed him. He eagerly kissed me back. I hoped the rushing feeling I got in my stomach whenever we kissed never went away. Pulling away, Jet brushed a leaf out of my hair and replaced it with a bright, yellow dandelion.

"I told you I'd win," he bragged.

I glared at him and swung my arm to slap his shoulder, but he caught my wrist and pulled me in for another kiss. I ran my hands over his chest and up to his shoulders. Leaning close, I whispered into his lips, "You haven't won yet."

With a playful shove, I jumped up and shifted, dashing away. He was quick to follow me.

Jet always beat me. He was just naturally faster. But maybe I could actually win this time. Hey, things could change.

After all, I did have a head start.

THE END

* * *

><p>Dear Readers (because anyone who's reached this letter or simply read the very 1st chapter is one),**

It's time to click that little "Complete" button.

Wow. That's it. That's the end. I can't believe it. I want to take the time to properly thank you, because without any of you this never would have happened. I've been writing stories since first grade, but not once have I finished such an intricate (and long) project. I owe you for that.

Originally, this wasn't going to be a trilogy and Marina wasn't going to be anyone other than a girl who was jealous of Bella. But she grew to be so much more than that and, as she grew, so did her story. I recognize that my connection to the incredible show, "H2O: Just Add Water," that started this trilogy to begin with, has dwindled with each new chapter. To those who wish I incorporated more of the show into my three stories, I understand (this is a fanfiction site) and I'm sorry it didn't work out that way. Marina's story took on a life of its own and, though I tried, Bella's space in it grew smaller and smaller. Despite that, I hope that those of you who stuck with Marina loved reading her thoughts, feelings, and actions as much as I enjoyed writing them.

Right now, I would like to individually thank all my reviewers for this third and final chapter of Marina's story. Each and every one of your reviews had me smiling or nodding in agreement or questioning my writing. You were the ones who reminded me of why some characters belong together (and others don't), of some small details I might have forgotten, of why I love all my characters, and of what I should be excited about. But, most of all, you reminded me why I write, and continue to write, every day. So the biggest thank you to:

CelticH2O

theflashbarryallen

ObsessedwReading

panfan87

BookPaige54

MirkaKaroliina

Heartitude

madeleine123

InGodIstillaTrust

Doveflight

RS975950

liveonpurpose

****_And thank you to all the anons:_****

the numerous
Guests

Uggghhhh

Excited

Lauren

Bluefire

Dreamwings

Docttorwhofan2

Lauren 111

_I could never thank you enough for taking the time to read my work and share your opinion. **__**And an extra thank you to any who read and reviewed my first two stories (you helped me get here)! But wait! That's not all! I would also like to thank all those who favorited, followed, or simply clicked on my story to give it a chance. You have all made an impact on these pieces and on me.**_**

****_Each one of these stories taught me something new about writing and reading. _ Secrets on the Shore of California_ taught me to enjoy the ride. _Secrets in the Woods of California_ taught me that not all problems can be solved. And, _Secrets Outside of California_ taught me to trust my characters, to trust the story. _ _I sincerely wish that you were able to take something away from these stories as well. __If I ever revise this trilogy to one day publish (hopefully) for real, I will remember all of you. Marina, Jet, Brad, Tommy, Fallon, and all the others will remember that you were the ones who first took interest in their lives. I hope you will remember them._****

****_Love,_****

****_Colette_****

****_P.S. Sorry for all the sap. I'm feeling sentimental._****

End
file.